

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

The Colour of Courage

Alison Budge

PDNALI001

A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Creative Writing.

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

[2012]

Supervisor: Henrietta Rose-Innes

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

University of Cape Town

ABSTRACT

Set in the challenging environment of a road construction project in Benin, West Africa, this is a story about three women and their intertwined lives. Each woman has a different personal reason for being in Benin. Each woman needs the courage to make a decision that will have far-reaching consequences.

Santie, a stranger in a foreign land, has resigned herself to her fallen fate. Through unusual friendships and challenging situations, she finds herself growing stronger and stronger. Eventually leading instead of being led, Santie takes control and saves the one she can. Margie, a young mother also in a foreign land, sets out looking for adventure and change, but instead finds loneliness and frustration. She must relinquish her ingrained beliefs from a privileged background, and learn from those around her. Her infant children need her, but she needs to find herself first, before she can move on. Cecile, an outcast in her own land, is looking for recognition from her own people, for friendship, and to be needed. She tries to show Margie the local culture and beliefs, and to integrate Margie's children into the community. All the while, she is unaware of her own son's influence on the project.

AJ Collins is the South African project leader, who takes Margie and his young family to Bohicon, Benin. As a young man in a management position, AJ needs to constantly balance the excitement of building this large project with the responsibility of looking after both his staff and his family. Cecile's son Osiamé works for AJ, and introduces the undercurrents of unrest that surround foreign aid projects in rural Africa. Progress is slow in the face of this constantly changing political and social environment.

Battling issues of language and cultural differences, these women learn from each other when they open themselves up to the new and challenging experiences. In this unusual setting, the women realise that no matter how different they seem to be to each other, irrespective of where they come from, they are all the same at heart - needing love and acceptance to be truly happy.

Learning to trust and respect each other, these women must find the courage to change their lives in order to save themselves, and those they love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To all of you, thank you for helping me to achieve my dream.

To Henrietta Rose-Innes, such a wonderful supervisor – thank you for the guidance and mentoring, for helping me to grow as a writer, and helping me to see a situation from all sides.

To Denise and Donald – thank you for proofing the manuscript and your suggestions.

To my friends and family, my book club ladies, my classmates at UCT – what a journey! Thanks for your enthusiasm and unwavering belief in me.

To Nickson - the stimulating conversation we had on the side of Kilimanjaro will stay with me forever.

To the UCT Creative Writing Department – Etienne van Heerden, Imraan Coovadia and the late Stephen Watson – thank you for the opportunity to mingle with some of South Africa's leading authors. Truly inspirational.

To the National Arts Council of South Africa – thank you for the financial support.

And to my very special Colin, James and Michaela – hugs and kisses for all your patience and understanding. Colin, thank you for the practical support while I was writing, for the adventure, and for the memories. Where to next?

Part 1: The Harmattan

Dry winds blow from the north, picking up sands from the Sahara Desert and blowing them south to the West African coast. The land is hot and dry from December to May. These are the winds of change.

University of Cape Town

1. Shooting

The silver metal was cold in his hand, and he was trying not to shake. He got no kicks from holding the gun to the man's head. The man was much older, and he could have taken him down easily in a one on one. But he'd been told that execs like this need to die in a more dignified way, so he must use a gun.

Stupid man, driving with his window open. In times like these. What did he expect? Not that it made it any easier to pull the trigger, just easier to get close to his head. He approached the pick-up slightly from behind when the man stopped at the stop street. The hand holding the gun was shaking a bit, so he brought up his right hand to hold it steady. He cocked the gun, the sound of metal on metal making him breathe faster. That's when the man turned his head, and saw him. It took him a split second to register what was happening. Seconds that felt like minutes. They locked eyes, light blue met dark brown. He saw the flash of recognition, although the slight creasing of the man's forehead gave it away that he couldn't place the dark eyes. *Are all foreigners' eyes so easy to read when they're scared?* He snorted through the balaclava, taking strength from the fact that to them, one black man looked the same as the next. *And what about the women? Do they all look the same to you too? Or just the ones that want money from you afterwards?*

The man narrowed his eyes. It was evident that he wasn't going down without a fight.

2. Margie

Standing at the top of the aeroplane steps, I looked around and took a deep breath. It smelled cerulean; a beautiful, clean, bright cerulean. I've always loved that colour blue – so inspiring, and hopeful. The colour of new beginnings. I smiled round at AJ, winked at James, and walked down the stairs.

I was first off. The sky was vast, and the runway deserted. There were no other planes that I could see, only the one guy with his paddles who had parked the plane. I liked it. It was quieter than I thought it would be. Nobody around me who knew me, who knew my recent past. Nobody that I had to pretend for. Other than my own people, of course. *This is going to be great!* The airport building was a suitably unimaginative grey concrete block, and I couldn't see any tall buildings in the city from where I was standing. It all seemed wonderfully forlorn. A buzz of excitement shot through me, and I gave Michaela a quick squeeze. I was carrying her in front of me, in her pouch. She had woken up as we dropped altitude, crying. Probably her ears hurting with the change in pressure. But she was quieter now, had settled a bit. Poor little things. It had been a long flight. James was holding AJ's hand, talking talking talking as always to the attendants, to us, to other passengers. He seemed to have survived the flight okay, seemed to be having a great time.

"Hold her tight and stick close," AJ said, "we're going in." He lifted James into his arms in a practiced sweep. I did a little skip to catch up to him.

"I can't believe we're finally here! It's finally starting. And we're in Ghana! Doesn't seem quite real."

He laughed. "It's about to get real... you ready?"

We walked into the airport building, and he presented the passports, yellow fever cards, entry visas, residence permits as we snaked through the formalities. The building was air-conditioned and pleasant, quiet murmured conversations, friendly polite staff. The president smiling down from his frame on the wall, above the coat of arms. I wanted to tickle the poster and shout "Hallo Africa! We're here!" This seemed like the real Africa, the Africa described by Livingstone and Stanley, of tropical forests and coconut palms and gin and tonics. Not like

our Africa, South Africa, where we lived in first world cities with first world lives. This was explorers' country. *Bring it on Baby!*

Curling posters presticked to the walls reminded visitors of the dangers of AIDS, malaria, dengue fever; a list of the countries from which visitors needed yellow fever injections. Good to see they kept a tight rein on these diseases. A typical African airport all round, and the customs guy in his immaculate uniform with shoes polished to a shine, smiled a charming smile of very white teeth in a very dark face. It all seemed cleaner than I had thought it would be, which was a relief. We collected our luggage from the carousel, everything was there, and nothing looked tampered with.

"That makes a nice change" said AJ. "You must be our lucky charm."

We loaded up the trolley, and AJ paused a moment, looking over at me. Gave me a brief smile. I looked up at him, and grinned back.

And then the automatic doors slid open and we stepped through into the manic chaos of noise and traffic in Accra. The cool calm that had so impressed me disappeared in a flash. *And the smells!* Definitely a rusty red now. It smelled of dust and diesel, and deep fried oil and apprehension. And wow, there were enough people! Squalls of people swirling around the airport parking lot, all chatting and going about their business. I ran a bit to catch up to AJ, and tried to link my free arm through his. Thought it'd be safer that way, I didn't want to get separated from him. It wasn't that easy though. He had put James into the top section of his luggage trolley and his arms were steel rods down the sides of him as he pushed the trolley and protected our little boy.

All these people! I started to sweat, the apprehension kicking in. I wasn't sure what we were rushing for, and it made me nervous. What wasn't I understanding? I was trying to be the explorer. I wanted to stop and catch my breath and look around and take this all in. At my own pace. I was here to experience, but it was all happening too fast and I was desperate to keep up with AJ. He kept looking around for me, and trying to slow down, but still the gap was widening. Luckily he's so tall, and I could see his head across the others. *This is manic!* I didn't like all these hands that were pulling at us, pulling at our trolleys, offering help, walking too close to me.

Thinking about it, my hands curled at which sweaty hands last touched the handle of my trolley. I tried to push the trolley with only my fingertips, but it was too heavy and I couldn't. I gave it a big push, so it ran by itself for a while. I looked down at Michaela in her pouch,

checking that she was ok. At least she was facing in to me. Breathing me in and not this acrid air. Not these fumes or the germs in the air. Someone slipped smoothly between me and my trolley, taking over the pushing. *Shit! What do I do?* I looked around desperately for AJ while I tried to get my trolley back.

“It’s ok Mammie, I am here to help.” *Who the hell are you?*

I didn’t know what to do. Thoughts flashed through me. *Do I push him away and scream loudly that he is stealing my trolley? Do I trust him and let him push the trolley? No of course not. This is Africa. First rule is never trust anyone.* I started to panic, feeling the familiar tightening pushing down on my chest, and knew I had to do something. That’s what I had learnt in all those sessions. *Do something. Tell someone. Get someone to help you.* I shouted to AJ.

“AJ! AJ! Wait! Help me!”

He looked back at me, looked at the guy, smiled and waved at him. *What the fuck – he knows this guy?* Signalled to me that it was ok. I looked at the guy with my trolley, and smiled sheepishly.

“Hi,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Welcome to Ghana, Mammie. We are glad to have *Monsieur* Collins back. We are happy to have you here. We are happy to have the *bébés*. You are very welcome.”

Now who feels like a twot. I breathed out, and blew my fringe out of my eyes. The wet tips of hair whipped against my forehead, and I realised how much I’d been sweating.

After the marathon journey across the car park to the shuttle bus, I was introduced to him formally. And also to the man trying to pry James out of AJ’s arms to greet him. James wasn’t interested one bit though, I think he was far too overwhelmed by it all. He leached onto AJ’s chest, clinging his little arms around AJ’s neck. He seemed very unsure - half hiding from these dark, loud strangers, half curious to investigate it all. But only from the safety of Dad’s arms. Poor little chap.

“Sifuel, Yusuf, this is my wife, Margie. And my daughter Michaela and my son here, James. They are our company drivers Margs, and will be driving us to Benin tomorrow. But first a hotel here, right Sifuel? I think *Madame* needs a cold drink.”

“Hello *Madame*, welcome. Yes it is very hot here. The hotel will be nice and cool for you. Sud Afrique is no hot like this, non?”

"No, it's very different Sifuel. It will be nice to explore your country. I am looking forward to staying in Benin. Thank you for coming all this way to fetch us, it is a long drive I'm told. And a cold drink will be wonderful, it is very hot here." He extended his right hand to shake mine, his left arm crossing his body to hold his right elbow, and gently touched my hand. I followed suite, presuming that's how it's done here. He reached in to Michaela in her pouch to pinch her cheeks and say something in French. I stifled an astonished snort, and repositioned myself to let him reach her without touching my breasts. I was going to have to get used to the different attitudes to personal space.

Michaela looked up at him with her big hazel eyes, and broke into a big grin. That did it. Sifuel exclaimed something, and clapped, and Yusuf laughed and deftly whipped her out of the pouch holding her high in the air, laughing and speaking sing-song French to the baby. *How do they move so quickly?* She was firmly against me just seconds ago, and now here she was being waved about! I started to object and reached across to get her, but pulled back when I saw AJ shake his head at me, short and sharp, stopping me in my tracks. His eyes told me to leave them, leave her. I dropped my hands a little, and ran them through my hair. I hadn't fooled anyone, but they politely ignored my gaffe. I was going to have to learn fast here, especially being the boss's wife. I picked up what they were saying after the second or third repetition.

"Who's a pretty baby? You're a pretty baby!" She was still smiling at them, her mouth open, toothless, soundless. Sifuel then took claim to her, holding her gently. She's just over four months old, so I instinctively checked to see that he was holding her properly, supporting her neck. Which he was. There was nothing else I could do, without appearing completely neurotic, and I had promised myself that I wasn't going to do that anymore. So I smiled gamely as I bit the inside of my cheek.

Yusuf deftly loaded our bags into the minibus, while Sifuel held Michaela and gave directions. I stood on the pavement, and the enormity of it all came crashing down. We were really here. We had really lugged these two little kids across the continent so that we could start a new life. I was tired, exhausted from entertaining a two-year-old on the flight, and looking after a baby. I felt I should have been appreciating the start of the adventure but the smell of diesel was getting up my nose, and the dust that swirled with every passing car and motorbike was sticking in my throat. I was hot, and sweaty, and needed some space to process all of this.

The hotel looked wonderfully romantic from the outside, and I breathed a sigh of relief. The short drive in the cool, air-conned bus had revived me a bit. As we parked, I noticed unusual palm trees and bright orange flowers I didn't recognise, upmarket cars with suited drivers hanging around in the shade, a once white building yellowed from the sun, with red dust climbing the walls over black mould. Old and stately and colonial. With staff to do everything. *I could definitely get used to this!* Sifuel went in to get our room keys while Yusuf unpacked the bags and took them off to our room. The passage to our room was dark, our eyes not yet used to the cool interior, and the door to our room was wide open. *Not very mosquito safe.* It all looked ok. First things first though, and I headed for the bathroom. I desperately needed to wash my hands, I could practically feel the bugs crawling on me.

"I think they've forgotten to prep the room properly, there's no soap at the basin, and no hand towel." I scratched in my vanity for the disinfectant soap, and found a towel, and took both kids from AJ back into the bathroom for a quick scrub.

"AJ," I called, "you're going to need to come in here and help me."

"What's up?"

"Well, there's no toilet lid for James to stand on, not even a toilet seat. You're going to have to hold him while I wash him."

AJ held James over the basin while I soaped and rinsed his face and hands, then the same for Michaela. James wriggled, Michaela squirmed, and I nearly put my foot into the toilet bowl trying to clean them and balance myself. This was grossing me out. I could feel the panic setting in again. Germs would be everywhere here. I had to be extra careful. I scrubbed my own hands with the disinfectant, and then did them again. Just in case. I headed back into the room, and looked around for where I could put them while I set up the camp cot for them to play in for a bit. Not that Michaela could play, but at least James would be contained for a bit while I checked out the room. I wasn't going to risk the floor, so I put two blankets down, one on top of the other, on our bed. The only bed in the room. I'd wash the bottom one as soon as we got to our new house, and keep the top one from touching these sheets. I hoped they were clean; we would be sleeping in them later. I set up the camp cot, lay Michaela down in it, put James in next to her, and gave him one of her rattles.

"Here boy, shake this for her. See if you can make her laugh." That always distracted him, and would keep him entertained for a bit, if only a couple of minutes. I took the gap, blocked all thoughts of dirty sheets, and gratefully stretched out on the bed. And just about broke my back on the rock hard mattress. It also sloped towards the middle, making me roll downhill and ending up nose to nose with AJ.

"Hello," he said, having rolled down from his side.

I burst out laughing. "Good grief! This is awful. Didn't you say that was a mid-range hotel? I hope they're not all like this. Do you think there is any other type of room that we can upgrade to?"

"We are upgraded. This is the best there is in this place."

"Hmm. Scratch this one off the list. It's not quite what I had anticipated."

"It's just for one night. We'll be in our new home tomorrow."

I smiled at him. "Good. I'm looking forward to it."

I looked around at the mosquito nets above our bed, hanging from a ring in the ceiling, the white walls that would have been stark were they not so dirty, and our pile of stuff that needed sorting. *In a minute*, I thought. *I'll be alright in a minute*. AJ got up to open some windows, and get a breeze through. The heat was stifling and the air humid and thick to breathe.

"Shit," he murmured.

"What's up?"

"The mozzie net over this window is broken. I'll open the other window instead." But that net was broken too, and focussing more as I looked around the room, I saw mosquitoes already in our room. Malaria mosquitoes, and lots of them. Death with wings and my two susceptible babies.

I jumped off the bed. "We've got to do something AJ. Look at all these mosquitoes! We've got to kill them, before they kill us." I found the spray that I had in my bag, the spray that would kill everything and started spraying all over.

"Wait Margs, first get Michaela out of this. She can't breathe that in, not with her lungs. You take her and James down to the dining room, and I'll spray and make a plan to fix the windows and meet you all there."

AJ did fix it, of course. He fixes everything. He closed the windows, hooking in one of Michaela's blankets around the frame, because one of the panes was broken. Not a great barrier, but better than nothing. And I'd washed all of her blankets in a mosquito repellent before I left South Africa, so hopefully that would have some effect. I now considered the hundreds of rands I'd spent on the special washing stuff a brilliant investment. I'd have to

wash that blanket again asap though, shuddering at the thought of how long ago the window frames had been cleaned.

We ate our first West African dinner veryhalf heartedly. We were all exhausted. James munched through his spaghetti with tomato sauce, and Colin, being used to the heat from before, ate a spicy peanuty beef dish. The intensity of the heat and humidity had taken away my appetite, but I ate some of the plain spaghetti and tomato sauce too. Michaela drank from me, so she was fine, but spicy food wouldn't work for me now, still breastfeeding. I couldn't get enough to drink. We gulped bottled water, with no ice, and straight from the bottle. We'd read enough about gypso guts caused by dodgy water frozen into ice cubes. Nobody had warned me though that they put the coasters on top of the glasses to stop the bugs from getting in the glass, rather than preventing wet rings on the table. I couldn't stomach the thought of the bottom of a well-used cardboard coaster touching where my lips should be, the paper layers separating at the edges and the beer advert mostly peeled off from the top.

Banging off the alarm early the next morning, I was relieved to get going. None of us had slept much – the fumes from the mosquito spray were bad, we couldn't open the windows and the kids were boiling in the camp cot, stifled by the net across the top. The mosquito net over our bed was torn, repaired in parts with duct tape. We were still hot and sticky; we'd tried to shower together the night before, but the water pressure didn't get more than a trickle to us on the second floor. Standing on a mildewed shower floor in plastic flip flops not wanting to touch the walls was more effort than passionate. The only bumping and grinding had come from the disco across the road, and the flashing and sparks were from its neon signs. *That* went on all night.

Sifuel and Yusuf arrived exactly on time after breakfast, looking smart in their long pants and collared shirts.

"I wonder how long it takes to get used to this heat, and to look so bright and breezy in the mornings."

"Margs, in your case, a very long time. I'd like to see it just once even." He'd always teased me – I'd never been a morning person.

"Do I look as bad as I feel?"

He smiled and kissed me. "You look fine. They're going to love you. Stop worrying."

"It's just that I am going to arrive there, and be presented, and I feel like there is sand in my eyes and sweat patches on my t-shirt. Not a great first impression."

“I promise the shower at home is better than this one. And maybe you can nap on the trip. If not, I’ve got eye drops.”

We loaded into the minibus again, turned the aircon on full blast, spat out the dust that flew out of the vents, and headed for the border.

I didn’t sleep in the bus. There was too much to see and I didn’t want to miss anything. It was a toss-up between exhaustion and exploration. Although I wouldn’t have been able to sleep even if I had tried. The drive was terrifying. Sifuel navigated around enormous potholes, weaving in and out while chatting to Yusuf. Dodging oncoming traffic, hooting warnings, swerving violently at the very last minute. When I started to feel light headed, I realised I had been holding my breath. My first lesson in having to relinquish control in West Africa.

I opened the window a bit when we slowed down through a town, and smelled verdant green. The colour of lush tropics, of salty sea air, coconut palms bent by the wind, and banana palms, thick and angular. Rich tropical mud, fertile and heavy with expectation, tingeing everything with its rusty red. Finally we got to the Togo border, to the checkpoint on the beach sand, the calming sea energy rubbing off on the customs guys; officials and visitors sauntering around and chatting lazily in the morning sun. We were told to stay in the bus; Sifuel would sort out the formalities.

All around us women milled with big grass baskets or flat aluminium trays on their head, selling sugar cane, sweets and bananas. Too brightly coloured cool drinks, sachets of frozen yoghurt in polystyrene cooler boxes and green oranges. Biscuits and bread with margarine that didn’t seem to melt. James was looking out the window which we opened when the aircon was turned off. He pointed to the cool drinks and asked us for one. Suddenly, one of the ladies saw him, and all hell broke loose. Languid and sun drenched one minute, frenzied and frantic the next. She dashed to the bus window, ululating and calling friends, sticking her hand in the window and trying to touch him. He got a fright, fell backwards onto AJ, and started crying.

Like frigging honey to bees, that egged them on – so many, many dirty hands reaching through the open windows, all trying to grab him or shove food in for us to buy. We pushed away the arms, slammed the window closed, then sat looking out at them. While they looked in at us, pointing and laughing. *Delightful*. Michaela had woken up with all the chaos and shouting, and started crying. Which attracted more interest. *Where the hell was Sifuel?* I calmed her down, and AJ held James tightly on his lap, soothing him. Wanting to appear

unruffled, we tried to smile politely, but there were just so many people all pressed up against the windows. Them staring in at us, and us not wanting to stare back at them, to meet their eyes. Awkward, unsettled, we sat there in the bus, waiting. Roasting in the scorching heat. James's eyes big and scared.

It was late afternoon by the time we had driven across Togo, to our new home town of Bohicon. Somewhere just inside the border, we had turned left off the coastal road.

"The road we're building runs parallel to this coastal road," AJ had pointed out. "They want to get these big trucks to use the new road higher up, and not put so much pressure on this road. You can see the traffic it causes, and look how bad this road is."

"It's better than the part in Togo."

"Yip, that's another phase of the project apparently, but in the future. Togo need to sort their part out, as does Ghana, and then Nigeria on the other side of Benin. We're just doing the Benin bit. Bohicon is about midway across the country, and we go east until the Nigerian border."

We travelled inland for another two hours. Around lagoons, and lakes, through villages and forested areas. Past planted fields, and people who seemed far from anywhere, carrying firewood bundles on their heads. Past people selling small buck or monkeys or sugar cane rats, crucified on poles and cooked on open fires at the edge of the road. Disgusting, but I couldn't look away. Past people selling the biggest fruit I had ever seen – pineapples and mangoes and bananas. Papayas and watermelon. And somehow seeing the fruit made it all ok. I don't know why, maybe the purity of it, or the relief of seeing something I actually liked and the kids would enjoy. Made me feel as if we'd made the right choice, this new start. We needed it, and had grabbed the chance. Made me feel like we were going to do better here.

She was waiting for us when we arrived, Cecile was. I knew her name, and a bit about her from AJ. One of the single men had given her up for us, as she had looked after expat families before and could speak some English. Which was great, because while I had done a crash course in French, I wouldn't exactly say I could speak French. And that's what they all spoke around here.

The man at the gate was the posted sentry and when he saw our car approaching, he called into the grounds, and we saw all of them come out. From behind the wall, the next door house, across the road. As we got out, there were lots of happy welcomes for AJ, back slapping, and hand shaking and high fiving. Clearly they liked him. Sifuel introduced everybody, and I stuck out my hand in greeting. The men held my fingers only again with no pressure, the West African hand shake of politeness and respect. Cecile bobbed a little curtsy which seemed rather out of place, but she was clearly being courteous. Very quaint. Nickson, the sentry, our new grounds man. And the grounds man from the next door house was also there to meet us, and two of the other maids. Quite a welcoming party.

"Let me introduce you all to my children. This is James," said AJ, looking at the little blond boy he had perched on his hip, "he is just over two years. And *Madame* is holding Michaela, she is four months."

And that was the start of it - Cecile took Michaela straight away, held her up at arm's length to have a good look, then said something to the others. One of the women replied, and they all laughed, and I tried not to get my back up. I wasn't quite up for this yet. Not that I had a choice.

"I am saying how pretty she is," Cecile said.

"Thank you. It has been a long trip for the children. They are very tired now. But we are looking forward to getting to know you. Thank you for offering to come and help us."

"It will be my pleasure *Madame*. I love the babies. Jolie bébé! Jolie bébé!" Cecile cooed. Then she hugged her close and kissed her cheek. I cringed. Germs on that new fresh skin. Foreign germs. I smiled and took Michaela back, and held her to my chest, surreptitiously wiping her cheek against my clothes. I'd wash it as soon as I got inside. James in the meantime was being high fived and patted and played with. Again, he was having none of it. He kept trying to get back to AJ, but they were picking him up and passing him round, they all wanted to touch him. It was bewildering, this rite of passage that he had to go through. That we all had to go through. And all the hands. So many, many germs. That's what got me. I looked across to AJ, who read the message and claimed James again.

"Let's show *Madame* the house," he said, swooping James up onto his shoulders. "Nickson, you going to lead the way?" I flashed him a grateful smile, and followed him through the gates.

3. Cecile

I stood back as *Madame* went through the gates, wondering if she would notice how clean the house was. *Monsieur* walked in first, ducking down to get the little boy through the door and she followed him in. He looked a bit nervous.

"*Merçi* Cecile, thanks for keeping it clean while I was away." So at least he noticed.

Madame turned to me and smiled, but didn't say anything. I wonder if she can speak French. *Monsieur* was showing her down the passage, to the kitchen, the bedrooms. I heard a commotion in the en-suite and looked in to see what was happening. She had gotten a fright when she saw the gecko running up the wall. Maybe she is not used to geckos. I wonder what else she's not used to. It always takes the foreigners some time to learn our things. I hope she is not going to get a fright every time she sees that lizard, for he lives in there, and I don't think he is going to move now. I have tried to chase him out every time I clean in that bathroom but he always comes back. So I think that's his home now. *Monsieur* doesn't seem to mind. Or maybe he is not so scared.

It will be fun to look after children again. They always make the days pass quicker, they're usually so busy. My little boy, he was always busy. He's grown up now, but he could never sit still when he was little. The little girl looks quite funny. I wonder if all white babies look like that at first. Her skin so pink and her hair so black. And so much hair! It is curly and wet, stuck to her face. I think it is hotter here for them. And her arms and legs are very fat. She must be a very healthy baby. Maybe there isn't so much sickness in South Africa. She is so different to her brother, with his yellow hair and his eyes of blue. I hope they will like me, and that *Madame* will trust me. Some of these white ladies are like that – they want you to do the work, and they want you to look after their children, but they keep looking over your shoulder to make sure that you are doing it the way they want it.

It is nice that *Monsieur* noticed how clean the house is. He is a good man. I hope *Madame* likes it here, and they stay for a long time. She doesn't seem to talk much, but maybe she is just tired. Nickson was saying that the aeroplane trip is 7 hours, and that you also have to wait at the airports too. I have never been on an aeroplane, so I don't know these things. He said that *Monsieur* told him before he went home this last time. Home to go and fetch his family.

I wonder if this will become their new home. Some of the maids are taking bets on how long this family will last here, with these two babies, but I didn't do that. I want them to stay. I hope she likes this house, it is a very beautiful place, clean and cool and with so much room. There are two bathrooms here, both inside the house. It is definitely a house for a wealthy person, this one. I have been to look at some of the other houses around here for the road people, and they are all beautiful like this. I have a good house too, but it only has two bedrooms and the bathroom is outside. My two children have their mattresses on the floor of one room, and my bed roll is in the other. My husband, he is late, he passed away some years ago, so it's just me and my two.

When I went to ask *Monsieur* about what he wanted to do for supper, he jumped up off the bed and came to the door quickly. Even though I had clapped to announce myself. I saw her on the bed crying so I think he didn't want me to see her. It is okay for her to cry. All the white women cry when they first come here. And then some of them cry again when they have to leave. And some others just leave.

"*Monsieur*, I am asking if you want me to get you some food for tonight. For your family."

"Yes, Cecile, that would be great. Thanks for thinking of it. I'll ask Nickson to take you on his bike. Couscous will be nice please. And onions and tomatoes. And some bananas, tea and milk."

"*D'accord*. And I have been squeezing many oranges for you today. There is some juice in the fridge. Maybe *Madame* wants a drink that is cold?"

"Thanks, that will be great. She is quite tired from the long trip. Just buy for tonight, and some bread for tomorrow morning. I'll show *Madame* around tomorrow, and we'll go shopping then."

4. Santie

It's not that I didn't want to come to Benin. Oh no, don't get me wrong. That's not what I meant when I said Over my dead body, Jaco. It just that there was so much going wrong then that by the time I left to join him, I thought maybe I would have given in to it all and died already. But never mind all that, life carries on even though sometimes you wish it wouldn't. So here I am now, and, my goodness, it's a strange place! But we mustn't complain because the Good Lord made this part of the world too, and I am sure He must have had a reason in mind when He did.

I am sure you know how it feels when you move into a new place, especially one that's already got all the furniture in place. It's a little strange using other people's furniture, when we have perfectly good furniture at home. We have had our home furniture for twenty seven years, and my comfy chair – it knows how it should feel when I sit on it to watch my programs. The chairs here don't feel right, but I mustn't complain, because at least I have a chair to sit on and a roof over my head. And we came very near to not having that, so I just keep telling myself it's a good thing that we're here.

All of our furniture, and my comfy chair, are being used by other people back in South Africa. We had to rent our house so we could earn a little more and what with my being here too, we should be able to save quite nicely, so that when we need to pay for Stefan again then at least we'll have some money around this time. But more about Stefan later, let me tell you about our new house, here in Bohicon.

I am going to try very hard to make our room a home for Jaco because that last time he came home to South Africa, and asked me if I wanted to come and live here with him, he said sharing with the two other men didn't make it feel like a home. A woman is a very important thing you know, the heart of the home, as they say. We have been married for twenty seven years, Jaco and me, and in all that time, he has never said that his house does not feel like a home. So that was when I decided to come here with him, because a man needs a home. And

even though it is only one room in the house that we have to share, I am still going to try my very best.

There was one thing that I did ask him if we could bring from home back in Pretoria though and that's my *lappieskombers*. What do you call that again in English? I'll think about it, but I don't want to stop and get out my dictionary now, because then I am going to forget what I wanted to say, so I will tell you later if you do not understand Afrikaans. The *lappieskombers* was my mother's and her mother's before her, and now it is mine. All the women in the van Deventer family have had it on their beds, because if there is one thing that makes a house a home, it is a homemade *lappieskombers*. A quilt! That's what it is, I knew it would come to me sooner or later.

Aretha just laughed at me when I tried to explain what it was to her the other day too, before I had shown her. Shame, poor child, she doesn't really understand my accent I don't think, and she seems a bit shy. She's already been here for a few months, she came here right at the beginning, when they were still setting up the place, with Andreas. I can see we are going to have a right old interesting time what with her not understanding me too well, and neither of us speaking French. But I am sure we will manage somehow, it's not like we have a choice really, so what must be will be as they say. But anyway, look at me, here I am already telling you about Aretha when I was trying to tell you about my house. Well, I suppose I was going to get to her anyway, because it is her house too. There are five of us sharing.

Each man here in this house is on the contract on single status, that's the most bottom status. That's what they call it when they just pay for the man to be here, not for his whole family. I can't understand why they have Jaco here on a single status, when they know he has a family, but Jaco says that we mustn't rock the boat and it is a good opportunity for us to get back on our feet again, especially now that Stefan is getting help. It is going to cost a heavy packet to get him right, but we must do what we must do. So each man has a room to himself, and then we all share the kitchen and the lounge and the two bathrooms.

I didn't tell Susanna in my letter that I must now share a bathroom, because I don't want her to worry about me. I will be fine, it is just going to take a little getting used to, that's all. I must just focus on the here and now, as they say. I keep wondering if maybe this is my punishment for the mistakes I must have made when I was trying to raise Stefan. The problem is I am not really sure what I did wrong to make him go down that path. But it must

have been something bad because otherwise surely God would be giving me and Jaco an easier time, especially now that we are getting a little bit older. Not that sharing a bathroom is very bad punishment; no, it's all the other stuff that makes life so hard sometimes. It's just that the bathrooms make me stop and think what I did to lose my en-suite, and to have to come here. It makes my stomach turn in knots when I think about it.

We are very lucky though because we actually have an air conditioner in the lounge, so things could have been worse I suppose. I don't know how the local people survive without one. All I know is that it is cooking! And then the other day, I had one of my flashes, so I was doubly hot. I had to have a shower in the middle of the day because I was perspiring so. I know it is not very lady-like of me to talk about perspiring, but please don't be offended, I am not trying to be rude, I am just trying to tell you how hot it is here, and all the different things that I find myself having to do. Sometimes I just laugh to myself when I think of all these new silly things. Like shower in the middle of the day. In a shared bathroom at that.

I know that the proper English word is a hot flush, but I like flash better. My friend at home calls them that, and so now when I say it, I always think of her, and it makes me smile. Although I must admit, just between you and me, and please don't tell Jaco, the other day when I thought of her, I cried a bit. I am going to miss her so much. We are neighbours back in Pretoria, and we used to watch our soapies together every afternoon. We liked to watch them together, so we could talk about the people and what they got up to every day. And the reason I cried you see was because it was four o' clock and I'd made my tea, and sat down in the lounge, but my programs aren't on this TV here, and anyway, who am I going to watch with? I am not sure if Aretha likes to watch or not. I must still get to know her better and like I said, our lines of communication are not so open, as it were.

I also didn't tell Susanna that Aretha is a black lady. She will think that very strange, me living with a black woman and sharing the same bathroom. Aretha is here with a Danish man, and that is even more strange I think. A Tanzanian lady with a Danish man, and neither of them can really talk to the other one in their language. Pillow talk is all you need, is what Jaco said to me the other night. That made me blush! But I'm a good Christian woman and I will be just fine here thank you very much, and I am sure that Aretha and I will find some way to communicate very soon, and then who knows? Maybe she will become my new friend to watch my programs with.

5. Margie

I loved the way they clapped when they arrived at the door. It's such a polite way of announcing yourself. I didn't recognise it at first, but then I learnt to listen out for it. That morning, I was distracted with getting Michaela dressed and fed so at first I didn't hear the clapping and a singsong 'ku-koo'. When James started echoing it, I got up to investigate, and found Cecile and two others on the front veranda.

"Hi Cecile, sorry I didn't realise you were here. Come in, come in." As they came in, and greeted James, it gave me a minute to look at Cecile properly. She was medium most things, but not in a bad way, just in a normal way. Medium height, medium weight, her hair was medium length, clipped down in combs, and her skin tone a medium brown. She's quite average looking, her jaw line neither sharp nor fleshy, her clothing style similar to what everyone else seems to wear. But her smile was ready, her forehead high, her eyes shone as did the apples of her cheeks. She seemed polite and friendly and respectful, like someone that I could become friends with. *Well, I hoped so anyway.*

"*Madame*, I ask my children to come today to introduce you."

"*Merçi*, Cecile, that is very kind." I turned to them and introduced myself.

"This is my firstborn Bénédictine, she has twenty four years. And this is my lastborn, Osiamé. He has twenty years." We soft-gripped each others' hands, and I used my left hand to hold my right elbow. I had to learn quickly. They politely mumbled greetings while keeping their eyes downcast. I must have seemed so brash to them.

"Béné, she wants to go to college and learn the secretarial, but it is very expensive. Maybe one day." She sucked at her teeth. Tssst. Tssst. The more sucks the more expensive.

"Yes, that is a very good job," I replied. She seemed lovely, Béné. Fresh and youthful, but with her mother's normalness. A wide, open, kind face. She was tall, must have got that from her dad, and had darker skin than Cecile's. Her hair was elaborate, in tiny cornrows, radiating in an arc from her temples, and she wore the traditional long skirt and top made of matching cloth.

"And Osiamé, what about you?" I asked, turning to her son. He was smallish, more like Cecile, but dressed in Western style, with jeans and a t-shirt. And the plastic slip slops. They

all seemed to wear these. Easy to take off when you go indoors I suppose. He had on the coolest sunglasses, that only twenty-somethings can get away with. Knock offs of the tear drop Raybans. Younger kids wearing them look like they've nicked their parent's glasses. Older than that, looks like you're still stuck in the Tom Cruise Top Gun era. Osiamé, he just looked slick. Now, the glasses were lifted up on top of his shaved head. "Is there something that you want to study?"

"I am wanting to find some work, but it is very difficult to find a job in Bohicon. So I am looking still."

"Your English is very good. Has that not helped you?"

"There are not so many English people in Bohicon. My mother she is teaching me. Maybe one day I'll find something."

Osiamé picked up James's soccer ball from the floor.

"My mother tells me you are from Afrique du Sud. You know soccer? You know Bafana Bafana?"

"Yes, I know them. Do you like soccer? You play here?" Bafana Bafana and Mandela. The conversation starters for South Africans the world over.

That got Osiamé. "I like Bafana Bafana. They are good players. They beat us last year in Togo. Aish, that was a bad day for us. I play with some friends every week, in Abomey. There is a soccer club there." I noticed he was a lefty, wearing his watch on his right arm, and he drank his water with his left hand. We hadn't quite figured out if James was left or right handed. Seemed to be equally strong in both, and it was bugging me a bit. That I didn't know.

Cecile came back and Béné jumped up, speaking excitedly to her mom. I looked up, to see Cecile holding Michaela quite comfortably in her arms, and choked on what I was saying. I took a deep breath. *This was a new start, and new place.* I had to let go, especially with Cecile, but I wasn't so sure about Béné, and prayed she wouldn't cough over Michaela or sniff or anything equally appalling. None of which she did of course. *I've got to get over myself, move on from the past. That's if I ever want to fit in here.*

6. Cecile

This was going to be a good house to work in, working for the boss for the road project. It impressed people when I told them, so I liked to let people to know. It might help them to forget my past. That would be good. *Monsieur* and *Madame* don't know anything about it of course, but I know. It was quite a far way for me to come to work every day, but it's all worth it. I would catch a zemijon here, and that only took me about fifteen minutes, from my home in Abomey, to my work in Bohicon. A bit longer if the driver needed to stop and buy gasoline from the roadside sellers.

I had to explain to *Madame* about the zemis, as we call them, the motorbike taxis that are how we all get around. The zemi drivers in Abomey all wear yellow shirts, whereas the drivers in Bohicon wear purple, so it is easy to tell the difference. I caught an Abomey zemi here in the mornings, and a Bohicon zemi back. Sometimes I would share with other people going my way, but only if they were ladies. I don't like squashing three people on the bike with a man pushing his privates against me. The zemi dropped me right at the house every morning, so I didn't have to walk very far anymore. It was nice to be earning money again. I used to have to walk very far. During those times when I had no money. But those days, I was putting in the past.

The houses of most of these engineers were in the Muslim quarter. It was handy to have a tall mosque close to the house, easy to explain to people where I work. *Madame's* house was very beautiful. It had a nice strong metal gate, classy with stars making a pattern along the top in the metalwork. The bricks in the front wall formed a lovely patterned border which was nice because all the people in the area could look in and see what was happening inside this fancy house. They are not used to white people in the area, so they often called in to me to ask what was happening. Sometimes they just liked to spend the time watching, especially when the children were playing.

I was very proud when the whole wall was full of people watching in, so all those people could see what an important job I had. They started from early in the morning, even before I got to work, and *Madame* said they called out to her before I got there to answer them. She said she got cross because when she turned to look at who called her, they would all just

laugh and walk away, and then others started again. She didn't like it at all. I don't think she realised how unusual it was to have a white woman here. The people were just curious. She was scared because she couldn't understand anyone.

The children from the street loved to look in, they'd never seen toys like there are in here. The really little ones asked older ones to pick them up so that they could also watch, and not miss any of the fun. Sometimes I heard scrambling and scraping, then I'd know to look for the little hands gripping the open spaces between the brick patterns. When the little face popped up, we'd smile and wave to each other. I'd teach James to wave back and maybe *Madame* would stop turning her chair around so that her back faced the wall and the people. It is very rude that.

The way their house was arranged you came in through the big gates from the road side, and the driveway ran along the length of the property to the carport at the back. Their driveway was two strips of concrete, where James ran up and down kicking his ball. The carport also had big double gates which lead out to the communal area that they built. There are five houses here for the engineers that all lead onto the swimming pool and clubhouse here. A swimming pool! There were no other pools in Bohicon, or Abomey even. I didn't believe Nickson when he first told me about their plans to build one.

I don't even have tap in my house, the poor people here like me all buy our water by the bucket from the people that own the water pipe. There is a water seller across the road from this house, and *Madame* was surprised when she first heard the sound of water hitting zinc, with the girls filling the basins for their families. They are strong these girls, and carry the water buckets on their heads for a long walk back home. Water is scarce here.

7. Margie

One of the women from that compound across the road had a lean-to on the side of the road, where she sold stuff. Cecile said I should go and say hello because her baby is the same age as Michaela. I hadn't been able to bring myself to do this, mainly because how on earth was I going to talk to her? Which meant that I hadn't been able to leave the grounds, because she was right there. Like, *right there*. Across the road, selling her stuff, watching me and my house. All the time.

The lean-to was in front of the high mud wall surrounding the compound where the lady lived. Inside there were mud houses, which were built onto each other, all opening out into an open, communal area. That's where I always heard a lot of noise coming from. For her shop, wonky poles held up a palm frond roof; the table seemed to have been there forever, and there was no pavement per se, the concrete had broken up and the table was on an island piece in the muddy sea of the road. This was shopping that was beyond my boundaries, the germs, the sand that blew in, and no sell-by dates. Our road was dirt too, with a huge ditch at the crossroads on the corner. The cars and zemis needed to drive around this, they couldn't go across. So the cars and bikes often came very close to the shop lady's stall. It's the fumes and sprayed dust that settled on that food too.

I didn't know how to describe my fear of all of this, and my revulsion, and the fact that even though I couldn't speak to the lady, I had nothing to say to her. But I had to try. I had to. And I sensed Cecile was going to be the one to force me out of my comfort zone. *Kicking and screaming*. When Cecile asked me this morning if I had met her yet, I said no, but that I was planning on going out later today, which she seemed to think was a grand idea. And which I could have kicked myself for, because I had no such plans, and hadn't intended to go anywhere. But once it came out of my mouth, it was out, I didn't want to look stupid in front of her. So I casually mentioned again, that yes, I was going out later, to take the kids for a walk around the block.

The problem was I had seen the road, gravel and potholey with litter everywhere, water pooling around, and it was dirty and smelly. Certainly not where I wanted to go walking. So I decided to read James a story first, which I would extend into Michaela's sleep time, which

would last until AJ came home for lunch, which would buy me time until at least two this afternoon. At that point James would need a nap, so maybe I could avoid it until about four. Yes, four was definitely a better time, cooler, and well, not now. *Why was I being so ridiculous?* Cecile said four was a good time, and that she would come with me then. *Bugger.*

I spent the day looking at the clock, and trying to slow James down, so the day would drag, and four o' clock would not come too soon. The stench of mustard yellow fear was getting stronger and stronger. I spent a lot of time talking to myself, psyching myself up. *Today* was the day that I was going to walk out of the gates and walk around in my new neighbourhood. *Now* was the time that I was going to do some of the looking, right back at everyone who was always looking in at me.

I wiped away the tears that had started to drip down my face. I was scared, and I was out of my depth and I didn't know how to move forward without going through the frightening parts. Good thing AJ wasn't home. He'd been watching me like a hawk since we got here. Watching for any of the old signs. And I was damned if I was going to let him see any. I was putting my demons to rest by being here. I just wasn't too sure how successful I was being.

"Why Mommy crying?" James asked, his forehead creasing into a little frown, as he wiped away my tears. "Mommy sore?" *Sort of.*

"Mommy's not sore, my baby, Mommy's just crying a bit. Silly Mommy. You want to go for a walk?"

He jumped up, all big smiles. "James walk," he said, and ran off to find his shoes.

So that was it then. I sniffed the air for the strong powerful orange red. The colour of the ground outside, the ground that was fertile and nurturing and cultivated growth. I was going to grow and cultivate the new me. I don't know why I see smells as colours, but I do. When I smell something, a colour somehow jumps out, twisting and turning and entwining around me. That day, I needed the strength and needed to find something that smelt of the colour of power. Because that day, I was empowering myself, walking outside my big grey metal gate. That gate was heavy to open, and squealed and protested as it did, all clunky and difficult. But the strength I needed was not for the gate, rather for the step I was taking.

No chance of doing it surreptitiously, without all the people outside the gates, and those looking through the wall, knowing what I was doing. *I can do this!* I repeated it to

myself under my breath, pulling James's t-shirt over his head too quickly. It hurt him, and he scowled at me. "Sorry Babes, I didn't mean to hurt you. Mommy will be more gentle." He rubbed his ear, and I cursed myself. My kids were my only allies, and I needed to keep that. I took a deep breath, and blew out slowly. Then took another just for luck, and casually called out to Cecile that I was ready.

I met the lady across the road within seconds. As Nickson opened the gate for us, and she saw us walking out, she shrieked. It startled me, and I looked around to see what was happening. I couldn't see anything, and Nickson was still just standing there smiling. I suddenly realised that it was me that she was ululating about. Women came streaming from all the nearby compounds. James and I just stood there, rooted to the spot.

"Come, we go and say hello," Cecile said, gently pulling my arm. *Yeah, right.* But I found myself walking across the road anyway.

"It's ok James, she's just not used to seeing us in the road. We must introduce ourselves." I squeezed his hand a little harder, both for his sake and for mine. She was laughing then, waving me over, shouting something all the time to who knows who. Responses were shouted back from behind the mud walls. *Is this normal, all this yelling and screaming?* I toyed with darting back across the road, and inside the safety of my gates. But I was in this, doing it, so I plastered on a smile, and went over to her. And the rapidly forming crowd of women, with some men lurking in the background. Lambs to the slaughter. My palm was sweaty and James was pulling backwards. I clutched his hand harder so he couldn't slip away.

"*Bonjour Madame! Ça va?*" I greeted her. The two sentences I had got down pat. She rattled off something so quickly, and so complicated, I only got a fraction of it. By then, the group that had gathered around me were all talking amongst themselves. *So loud.* Crowded around so close. I was feeling overwhelmed, the bright patterns on their dresses making me dizzy. So near, so many colours. So many patterns, going round and round and round me. I was in the middle of this, and I couldn't breathe. Their scent was overbearing, pungent. I started breathing through my mouth, but all I could think of was the number of germs coming into my mouth.

A tickling on my leg distracted me, and I looked down to see James trying to crawl under my skirt, in between my legs. I let go of his hand, and allowed him to hide. The baby on my chest was the centre of attention anyway. The shop lady took Michaela out of my pouch, held her up and laughed hysterically at something. Jabbering all the time. Then she brought her down and kissed her. On her mouth. *Oh goodness, I can't deal with this!* This is my worst fear. That it'll happen all over again. *Not this baby! Not again! I can't deal with this.* I closed my eyes like I was taught, and tried to take some deep breaths. Her friends joined in the laughing, then Michaela got passed round and round the group, with each of them adding in their comments, and starting the laughing all over again. I wanted my child back, but I forced myself to stand still, do nothing. Cecile nudged me, bringing me back.

"She ask you a question."

I looked at the stall woman again.

"Que l'appellez-vous?"

Ah, go that one. *"Elle s'appelle Michaela."*

"Mi-cha-el-a! Mi-cha-el-a! Mi-cha-el-a!" They all tried it out, pronouncing it the French way. Pinching her cheeks, stroking her hair, lifting her up into the air. And she didn't make a peep, just took it all in with her big dark eyes. I started to sweat. Flashes of Michaela lying in the hospital, just a few weeks earlier. Flashes of another hospital visit, longer ago. I pushed that memory away, I didn't want to go there. But Michaela in hospital, the incubator, drips, beeping machines. Tubes inserted into her tiny baby heel, medicine flowing, the oxygen masks. *What the fuck was I doing letting these people all touch her?* These dirty smelly people with their poor people's diseases. What's on their hands? What sicknesses have their kids got?

Cecile must have seen me bunching the fabric of my skirt in my fist, shifting from one leg to the other. Or she sensed that I was about to grab Michaela back. She deftly reached out and reclaimed Michaela, holding her gently in her arms.

"They say you have a very beautiful bébé. This lady is the owner of this shop, and she wishes you many blessings. She also has girl child the same age. She ask if you want meet her baby."

Is she sick at the moment? Does she have a snotty nose? On the outside, I nodded. Squashed the impulse to run back inside the safety of my walls. Behind my safe heavy grey gate. I could feel James wriggling under my skirt, blessed little boy. More wriggling, then a

plaintive "Mommy?" I reached down and picked him up, sitting him on my hip, both arms around him. Instantly, the mania started again, these women loud, pushing in closer, so many hands on him. He buried his head into my shoulder, but then more people could touch his hair. He started crying, hitting them away with his little arms. Trying to crawl into me to get away. I swivelled him to my front, awkward over Michaela's pouch, and moved my arm to over his head. His face in my chest.

I heard her tell them James's name, only she pronounced it Ja-meas. More talking and questions to Cecile, and I watched her preen. Suddenly it struck me. Was this what the whole thing had been about? Cecile showing off her new people? Being the lady of the moment? She was certainly holding court with style. I felt my breathing quicken again. There she was, smug, chatting back and answering questions. While I was feeling smothered, suffocating with a smile, a traumatised little boy clinging to me and crying. On our fun afternoon walk.

By this time, the shop woman's daughter had been brought to me, tied on the back of a young girl of about ten, who seemed perfectly comfortable with it.

"This is her last-born Ndjune."

"*Jolie bébé! Jolie bébé!*" I cooed, touching her arm. *Thank heavens no snot.*

"Please tell her that her baby is beautiful and I hope she will be a blessing to her and her family."

Sleeping against the back of her older sister, or whoever the other girl was, Ndjune was a tiny thing, looking so small and frail compared to Michaela. And Michaela had had double pneumonia, and had been in hospital for two weeks out of her very short life. I wondered why this little girl was so small.

"When was she born?" I asked through Cecile.

"October 24th, she has nearly four months now." The translations went back and forth.

"24 October! That's Michaela's birthday too. They are twins."

"Here, in Benin, twins bring very much luck to the family. You will have good fortune here. It is good you come. Later, I will tell you about twins."

Cecile told the crowd that Michaela and Ndjune were born on the same day. Again, the jubilation, the high pitch ululating, the crowding and pinching of cheeks. With that noise, I'd had enough. It was definitely time to move along, so I politely inspected her few bits and pieces on the old wooden table, and asked the price of a little packet of biscuits for James. I

squashed thoughts of how old the biscuits were, and how long they had been sitting in the sun.

“*Non non, c’est un cadeau pour Ja-mees*” she smiled as she held out the packet to him. I told him that the lady had some biscuits for him, and he turned his head to look at her, then back to me, unsure. I nodded, and he darted his little hand out to take the packet, then held them tight to his chest.

“What do you say to the kind lady?” I prompted him.

“*Mercy bounkoo*,” he said shyly.

She squealed with laughter, and all the women started up again, more pinching, and squeezing, and ruffling his hair. He buried his face again. The walk around the block was not going to happen anymore. Time to go home. My first venture out the gates on foot, and I had managed about ten meters. *I’m such a wimp.*

We went home, back to the quiet air-conditioned rooms, to the cool, tiled floors. I ran a bath for the kids, poured in some antiseptic bubble bath, wanting to wash off the streets, scrub off the closeness of poverty. I needed to wash Michaela's hands, which she always sucks. I had to find coping mechanisms if I was going to survive here. I had to accept that history didn't always repeat itself.

I let James splash around in the bath a bit. He was quiet, his mouth pinched. I didn't know if he was angry, or sad. Probably both, I supposed. *What are we subjecting him to?*

“Ku-koo!” I heard Cecile call down the passage. “Ku-koo!”

“I’m here Cecile, in the kid’s bathroom.” She came in, and swished the water to James, cooling him down and coaxing a smile out of him.

“I am happy you met that lady, the shop keeper. She is a good woman, the friend of the neighbour of my cousin, the tailor. She sells good things, is very honest.”

I thought about what she sold, the little plastic packets, with unidentifiable contents, lined up on a rickety old table in the heat on the pavement. Well, not even a pavement. All the powdery things on the table were sold in quantities of maybe a teaspoon or two. She filled up the corners of packets, forming plump little sacks, sealed with a twist.

“What was that blue powder she was selling?”

“It is for washing the clothes.”

“And the other things?”

“There is salt, and ah, *poivre* – how you say?”

“Pepper.”

“Pepper, yes pepper. And in the boxes is the sugars.”

I had seen that sugar here is sold in cubes, one hundred cubes to a little blue box, but she sold loose cubes. And Maggi stock cubes, individually, and tomato paste. And the biscuits that she had given James, with orange flavoured filling. That was all she sold.

I wondered if it was worth it, what her profit margins were. She wasn't at the table all the time, I had seen it unmanned sometimes when we drove past. Did everyone know where she lived and go and call her when she had customers, or did she have lookouts? Lookouts I supposed, everybody seemed to watch everyone here.

“It is the tailor's neighbour's people that sells the water,” she said, interrupting my thoughts. “You will see. I will take James to show him the cows when they come. Au revoir *Madame*. See you tomorrow. I must go now. Bye bye Mi-cha-el-a. Bye bye Ja-mees.” *Cows? Did she just say cows?*

8. Cecile

Madame was always so worried about how dirty everything was. I was cleaning harder than I ever had, and everything was spotless according to me. I used all of her soaps to try and stop her worrying, but she's so scared of the germs she kept telling me about. The other day she came and spoke to me. "Cecile," she said, "do you know anyone who can come in to clean the floor, the tiles? Just a piecemeal job."

I thought of Osiame straight away but pretended to think about it for a long while, so she could realise what a difficult job this was going to be.

"I will pay them well. I just need someone who can manage it."

"You will need to ask Nickson to buy the proper floor cleaning soap, and I tell him which one. Then my son Osiame can come clean. He is strong and young enough for all the bending. And it will be good for him to earn some money. When do you want him to come?"

"As soon as possible. I'll ask Nickson to buy some strong cleaner, and some buckets and brushes and stuff. This floor is disgusting. I don't like all the dark patches at the edges of the room. I think that dirt has been there for many, many years." I am not sure what she is talking about. This Arab floor is very beautiful, with the mosaic tiles in the different colours.

"I see. I will tell him what to do. Maybe he can come soon."

Osiame came in a few days later, and came round to my room to change after he met *Madame*.

"Mama, I waited on the veranda until she saw me. But I don't think she remembered me. She shouted at me and asked me what I wanted there. Why'd I'd come in the gate by myself."

"And then?"

"Then I reminded her who I am, and she laughed a very funny laugh. I think she was embarrassed."

"Good. How can she not remember you, when I told her that you will be coming to clean. Maybe one black man looks the same as the next to her."

"Maybe. Probably. But anyway, then I greeted her properly, and held out my hand. I think she was still not thinking because she shook it, very fast up and down, but then remembered, and changed to do it properly."

I laughed when I heard this. “She does try, this one. It’s quite sweet how she gets it wrong so often. That’s why they look in the wall so often, they think it’s very funny.”

He laughed at this, my boy. I am very proud of him. It was good that he was going to clean this floor, because it’s a big area and there are many rooms. It needs to be someone who is strong. Osiname is the right one for the job. He thanked me so kindly for the job. I raised that boy right.

The mosaics near the walls were much darker than the ones in the middle, so Osiname started there. He scrubbed and scrubbed that boy, on his knees and hands all day, never complaining, just stretching every now and then. Standing up and walking around. After the morning, he asked me to ask *Madame* for some stronger cleaning soap, because the soap that we got takes lots of scrubbing.

So Nickson got something stronger - a liquid that bubbled when you poured it on the floor, with a strong smell but it made it quicker to clean the floor. I told Osiname not to finish the job too quickly; a job like this is important and they needed to know it.

“How you doing Osiname?” *Madame* asked.

“I am well, *Madame*.”

“You sure? Your back not too sore?”

“My back is not sore. But maybe my legs are a bit tired from the hardness.”

“Oh right, hang on, I’ll get you a pillow.”

“A pillow would be very kind. Thank you *Madame*.” I saw her looking at him while he cleaned, and wondered what she really saw. Did she see the life and fire in his dark eyes, and the inner strength that came from heartache when he was so young? Did she see him as well dressed for the job, respectful of her and her house and what this work meant to him? Or did she only see the broad shoulders stretching his t-shirt, and the muscles in his arms that meant he could manage this job? Did she notice that he was left-handed, or did she just see someone who was coming to clean her floor? Did she see actually notice his short, powerful legs feeling the hardness of the floor? Did she notice his very black skin, strong jaw line, and neatly cropped hair, or are those things that only a young black woman from Benin would notice? Not a young white woman from South Africa about the man scrubbing her tiles.

He had told me about some blisters on his hands at lunch time, but I said that they weren't bad, maybe it was just because he wasn't used to working so hard for so long. He should carry on. It was looking good now, all the tiles were nearly white.

"Osiamé, this looks amazing! So clean. So this is what the floors are supposed to be like. Can you stay a few more days, and clean all the floors for me?"

He smiled, happy about the extended job. When Nickson heard that he had finished in the lounge, he came to look.

"What do you think Nickson?" *Madame* asked.

He shook his head a bit, and held his chin in his hand while he thought about it. "I no see that floor ever so white before."

"This is fantastic. I always want to lie down on the floor to get cool, but it's always been so dirty. Now I can, because Osiamé has cleaned it so beautifully. No more dirt. No more germs." I laughed. I hope she is joking about lying on the floor. But I still don't know with this lady. She does some strange things.

"Hold on a minute, Osiamé, let me get your money." She disappeared for a minute to her room, and came back with some notes. She held them out to him, and then she saw his hands. She nearly dropped the money.

"Oh my goodness!" She took his hands and turned them over. "Cécile!" she shouted at me, "why didn't you tell me his blisters are so big? And there're so many! Osiamé," his turn now, "why didn't you ask me for some gloves? They must be so sore! Are you in a lot of pain?" She was holding his hands gently like I'd never seen a white woman hold a black man's hands before. And then I saw a drop of water fall on his hands, and I realised that she was crying. I don't understand her at all. Sometimes she expects so much, and sometimes, she is so soft.

"He will be okay in a few days, they will go down." I push his hands out of hers, but not too roughly. This is my son, I know that the blisters will go away soon, but the memory of how hard he worked and how he didn't complain will last a lot longer. Sometimes we all need to suffer now a little bit for something better tomorrow. And then another part of me is sorry for her, we're all just mothers. And mothers all have soft hearts and don't want to see other people get hurt.

“Osiamé, please wait on the veranda. I’m going to phone *Monsieur* quickly.”

I hear her talk to him about the doctor. Next thing she’s with Osiamé at the outside table.

“The company nurse is coming here now to look at your hands. He’ll be here in about twenty minutes. Can you wait for him? I’ll make you some lunch so long.” That is very kind, I am not used to having my boy being treated like this. It’s not normally what happens with the white people, and I’m grateful. And my boy, he has done well. He’s made a very good impression, and I know *Monsieur* will hear all about this later. Sometimes the sacrifice is worth it.

University of Cape Town

9. Santie

Let me tell you some more about the people I live with. Aretha is very quiet, but I think that's more because she doesn't speak English too well. She is quite short, and a tiny little thing, so thin that I hope the wind doesn't blow too hard here otherwise she is going to get blown away for sure. We sat together in the lounge the other day and next to her, I felt like one of those hippos that you see in the magazines. You know, when they all lie on the banks of the river, and their tummies are all big and pink, and their legs sort of short and stubby. This is how I look, especially when I have the lady sitting next to me looking like the reeds growing on the river bank.

But anyway, I am getting sidetracked. I tend to do that, you know, start talking about one thing, and then that reminds me of something else, so I change topics and sometimes forget what I was talking about in the first place. I take my fish oils now so hopefully that will help me to remember more. Although there are some things in my life that I will never forget, even the things that I want to, and I know it is the same for Jaco. And there are definitely things that he wants to forget. Shame, my poor man. He had a very bad time in that war. But now, look at me, getting sidetracked again.

Aretha is thin, and a very dark brown. Much darker than the black people we have in South Africa. She has got very pretty eyes, also very dark brown, and her hair is in those tiny little plaits, tied close to her head. Cornrows, she tells me. She told me she met Andreas in Tanzania when he was working there, before this project. Her uncle and aunt were raising her because her parents died when she was very little.

Dennis is the other man that is sharing the house with us. He is also on single status but that is not so bad for him because he is the only one here. Like I mean his wife is still in South Africa, and his children are there too. But they are grownups and have their own littlies, so at least granny stayed close to help raise her grandchildren. He seems a very nice man, does Dennis.

He is a bit older than us, and looks like he has been working outside in the sun for a good many years. His skin is quite tanned, and he's got those wrinkles that outside people get from squinting into the sun for so long. His hair is silvery white, and quite long - he wears it in a pony. Quite a funny thing that, his ponytail. I am not sure why he keeps his hair long. I don't know him well enough yet to ask him but with all of us living so close to each other I am sure that I will find out soon enough. It is nice that he is also from South Africa, we can talk Afrikaans to him and he understands, and it is not always this trying to talk in English.

I forget what job Dennis does here on the contract. I get a bit confused with all the people I am meeting and what they do. I know he works outside. Oh look at me, I am telling you stuff you already know. I also don't know what Andreas does here, exactly. But they are all building the road from nowhere to nowhere as Dennis says. The South Africans all report to a young guy, AJ Collins is his name. He's a good boss apparently, both Dennis and Jaco say nice things about him. Jaco says it is quite strange though to be answering to someone who is just a bit older than his own kids. Then the Danes have someone different that they report to, but it's the same project. The Danes and the South Africans together, what a funny crowd to put together in the middle of Benin. Sometimes I just don't understand the way the world turns.

10. Cecile

When I finished at the market, I stopped for a coffee with that good man who ran the coffee stall at the corner of the main road, and the road to *Madame's* house. I treated myself to a Nescafe and a bread most days.

The mayonnaise was thick that day, the man was feeling generous. Maybe it was just because he wanted to talk. There weren't many people on the benches today, and the radio was playing Angelique Kidjo softly while he wiped down the plastic table clothes. Rinsed out the sponge in the red plastic bowl of water, and boiled the kettle over the small coal stove.

He ran a good stall, this man. The people who drank their morning and evening coffee here all knew the white foreigners, who lived just up the road. And they knew I worked for them, and always wanted to ask questions. Today, I was up for chatting, so as he stirred the sugar cube into the cup, he asked me about the family. I told him about this and that while I drank, and then finally, about Michaela being a twin with the daughter of the Dossa family. The family at the compound with the tap. He knew them.

Then he suggested that I buy them the twins' fetish, just to keep them both happy, and make sure that the blessings were plentiful. It was a good idea, and after wiping my chin of the crumbs that flaked from my sandwich, I went back to the market. To the parts where I don't usually go, to the fetishes, and charms and stalls of very dark magic. I didn't like it there with the *voduns*, but the man from the coffee stall had given me a good idea.

"Here *Madame*, a gift for Michaela." I had found a pair in the market.

"Thanks Cecile." She took the carved little wooden statue from me, turning it over in her hands. "What is it for?"

"It is for Michaela and Ndjune, the twins. This is a very fine thing. Twins are a blessing to the family, and now they are a blessing to two families! This is one statue from two that are identical. I gave the other one to Agbenyaga just now."

"To who?"

"Agbenyaga. The mother of Ndjune."

“Oh, right. Or as we like to call her, Mama Shop.”

“Mama Shop.” This is something I have found. White people struggle very much with our names, and often they make up other names. My name is not Cecile. But it is too difficult for them to pronounce so for the whites, I have changed my name.

“Like I was saying, twins have special talents and are a gift to the family. They are the ones that keep the family healthy, make them rich, and protect them from sickness and death. But you must be careful to keep them happy, otherwise they use their powers for bad as well, and make everyone unhappy.”

“And how do we keep them happy?”

“I think from the way she is sucking that fetish, she is happy with it already.” *Madame* looked down at Michaela, pushing the little statue out of her mouth.

“Poof!” She said. “Not in your mouth. Poofie!” She says very funny things sometimes.

“Twins are the chosen ones of the spirit powers. They have one soul, but in different bodies. It’s not really like this with Michaela and Ndjune because they are not real twins, but I thought we must just be safe anyway.”

“Safe? How’s that?” Now I had her full attention.

“Well, like I say, it’s not really the same here this time, but when twins are separated because maybe one dies, then the soul loses its balance. Maybe it sways into the afterlife, maybe it sways into this life. The dead twin tries to pull the living one over to join it. So what we do here, is we give the family these fetishes. We ask the priest to put the soul of the dead one into the fetish, so that the twins are not alone anymore. They are together again, and the dead twin no cause any more trouble. For now, for Michaela and Ndjune, maybe they will miss each other, so I give them both one fetish so that the other half is always with them.”

“A priest does this? The Roman Catholic priests here?”

“No, the traditional African religion priests.”

“Oh, I thought you were Roman Catholic.”

“Yes, I am. But also we need to ask our ancestors to talk to God for us. Me, I am too small to talk to God. He is too big and too important. So we ask our priests to talk to our ancestors, and all the different gods, and then these ones, they talk to God for us.”

“Oh. Ok. I see.” But from her face, she didn’t look like she was seeing.

“Also, if you don’t give twins all your attention quickly, then they get... how you say... get cross very quickly and are not happy.”

“Um, moody?”

“Maybe this is it. Moody. We must not let Michaela get moody.”

Madame laughed. “I think she will like it very much if you always do what she wants, to keep her happy.”

“Yes. She will like it very much. I will try my very best. Maybe she can share the good luck and the blessings with me too!”

“She will, Cecile. I’ll make sure of it.” Ha! This *Madame*. How much power does she think she has?

University of Cape Town

11. Margie

“You ready to go?” AJ asked.

“In a few minutes, I’m waiting for the bread lady.”

“Leave it, we’ll get in town. She doesn’t come at the same time every day does she?”

“No, never. It’s just that we don’t have any bread, and James is going to get hungry soon. But we can get it in town, they sell it everywhere. Just keep an eye out for the walking basket of bread.”

We were going out for a drive. AJ wanted to drive me to the end of the project road and show me some of the more remote areas around Bohicon. I still wasn’t feeling quite myself, everything was very surreal about my life now. I needed to constantly pretend to be someone for the staff - the confident, capable boss’s wife. Other times, the pretence was for AJ, proving to him that I was fine, that I was coping, that I was the capable mother. Sometimes, I was desperate to drop all the pretence and try and find me again, buried underneath.

I was missing my friends, and other babies, and my mother around to help me raise my own babies. And I found I was anxious, all the time. About everything. It was getting to be my normal state. Today, I had made a concerted effort to put a smile on my face, and get excited about exploring. AJ was keen to show me where he drove most days. He kept on about the sounds of the millions of frogs in the rivers after the rain and the majestic baobabs. Getting out of the house would hopefully clear some of the grey anxiety that seemed to always be lurking on my horizon now.

We found a bread seller before we got to the main road. James tucked into a French stick while we slowly joined the manic worm of traffic that managed to be both slow and chaotic at the same time. Another constant worry was that AJ would knock somebody off their motorbikes, the way they cut in front of his big pickup.

Right now, there was a whole family on one bike that almost scraped our paint as they pushed in - dad driving the motorbike, a child squashed in the middle, mom behind, and a baby tied to her back. A bag stuffed full held on her head, chickens with their feet tied

together hooked over the handle bars. Lifting their heads every now and then, before dropping back down to watch the world go past upside down.

As soon as we left the town, the road quietened down, and my mind with it. The number of Citroen 501's and ex-European luxury cars dropped, the heaving masses of people were left behind, as were the pavements crammed with bicycles, plastic ware and mattresses piled high, competing for space with sacks of grain and rice and corn. In old cement bags. Freaked me out, that. Not an inch of free space anywhere.

Bohicon wasn't big by any stretch of the imagination, only about 100 000 people, but it was crowded. There always seemed to be people around, in the market, walking along the roads, in the road side stalls, filling the roads with zemis and cars and bicycles.

"We had to move some people from here, relocate them."

"Oh yeah? How did they take that?"

"They were all paid out, offered relocation benefits. We're charged for this, 'in accordance to municipal standards' which I suspect are a bit higher for us than normal. I know these benefits go to the local government representatives of the ruling party, who want to get things moving, quickly and smoothly, and then they move the locals along. Find them new land and stuff. Elections are coming up and they've got to prove that they're getting things done. That the road is going ahead. I don't know how much gets down to the man in the street, but enough apparently."

"Sounds a bit dodgy."

"Yip, a steep learning curve here of what makes things work."

"And is it? Working, I mean?"

"Yes, I think so. We're getting there. We've laid out most of the way, and work has started already. That was the celebration we had a week or two ago, local priests blessed the land for the new road, we rah-rahed the work of the ruling party, that kind of thing. We've got local guys advising us. We're still waiting for some equipment to arrive, the container is due in a week or two, at the beginning of March."

"There're a few parallel teams that are working on different sections at the same time. That's why I drive up and down this road all day, it's quite difficult to be everywhere all at once, so I need to get good team leaders for every point. You'll see the river we have to span

a little later. There's a separate bridge team that will work on that. We're hoping security's going to be okay, because it'll be a bitch to try and monitor each of these teams, along this whole way."

"Had any problems yet?"

"Nope, nothing serious. A bit of diesel theft possibly, but not too much. We haven't got our consumption stats worked out properly yet. So we think it's a bit more than it should be, but we'll only know later on. We're watching it, and have got a security company on the job. Everything else is good so far. Like I said, the municipal and governmental guys are really making things work right now. We just need to follow their lead, and work with the locals properly. With their manners and traditions. We need to respect the ruling party, the guys in national government will make or break this project."

The constant buzz from town turned into a peaceful hum of tropical insects in their space. The countryside opened up, as did the blooming cotton bushes planted along the road, their white puffs stained red by the dust. The rows and rows of potato mounds converging in the vanishing point, women bent double working the lands, their legs still straight. I'll never know how they managed to do that for so long, without breaking their backs. Just carrying Michaela around on my hip gave me a sore back.

"Goodness, look at that!" I pointed out some women, topless with dangling breasts. One of them had passed her breast under her arm to a suckling baby tied on her back.

"Yours look much better," AJ said as I felt him look over to appreciate my breasts, full and jiggling gently on the bumpy road.

"Eyes on the road, buddy." He laughed and reached over to squeeze my leg, leaving his hand resting there.

The trip took about an hour, with James shrieking in excitement every time we passed one of the big yellow excavators or rollers. We chatted the whole way, it was great to be just our family for a change, instead of having staff around us all the time.

"Are you listening to me?" I asked him at one point.

"Of course," he said, glancing over. "Or did I miss something?"

"You were tuning out there, and grunted instead of answering."

"Sorry. Might have done. Ask me again?"

“No, don’t worry. It’s not really important. Sorry that I’m chewing your ear off. It’s just nice to have someone to talk to. It’s quite tiring talking to Cecile. Bit of a communication gap, and definitely a miss when trying to discuss anything of importance. So you’re it, and now that I have you captive, you’ve got a lot of listening to do.”

“Jaco’s wife has arrived. I’ll arrange a car to bring her to our house, and Andreas’s partner Aretha. You can do the girly tea thing.”

“Would be great to meet them, I look forward to it.”

By this time, we’d reached Ketou, the town at the end of the road project, seventy kilometres from Bohicon. “We’ll stop here for a drink, and maybe some more bread if we can find it.” We found a local lean-to bar, and sat down.

“Nothing like a warm coke on a sweltering day.” The cokes were tepid, there was no electricity in these parts, nothing like a fridge. We sat on upturned crates, both from the local brewery and the universally recognised red Coke crates. The owner picked up the bottles and flipped off the metal caps. No glasses, no straws.

“I want to see this... how you’re going to drink this without your lips actually touching the glass,” AJ teased me. I simply smiled at him, I wasn’t going to rise to the bait. I knew he was still watching me carefully, trying to assess my state of mind. I didn’t want to get into it today, so kept myself neutral. Affable. *The me I used to be.*

“You finished?” he asked a bit later. “Come, I want to show you a wood carver’s shop I’ve seen along here somewhere. Can’t quite remember where it is,” AJ said. He tried to describe the shop, but he could have been talking about any of the block shops along the road, and we had to peer into each one as we drove past. I spotted it first.

“Is that it? The one with his stuff on the leaves?” His wares splayed out in front of his little shop, on palm leaves that formed a mat. The carved chairs and tables and figures were still clean, but it must be a mission to move this all in and out every day.

“Cool. What we going to buy?” I asked him.

“I don’t know, what do we need?”

“Is it ever a question of need with us?”

He laughed. “True. Let’s go and have a look.” We picked our way through all the wares, from the highly oiled new things outside, into the dark dusty recesses. To the old, cracking wooden carvings that had been forgotten in the corners. We found two side tables. They needed a dusting, and a good oil, but I could see the potential. “They look like they’re carved

from a single trunk each. Hmm, have a bit of an issue with that. I wonder how sustainable these forests are.”

“Oh boy, here we go. Bunny hugging and Greeny-ing. Do you like them?”

“Yes I do. They’re wonderful. I love the fact that the body’s missing.” The solid top balanced on the head of an arty version of *The Thinker*, the body missing, but the elbows connecting with the bent knees, and holding his head in his hands. Looked a bit like I felt on some days, like part of me was invisible. We pulled them out into the sun, and AJ started bargaining. Eventually they settled on a price, and shook hands, sealing the deal. “Thanks,” I said as we climbed into the car, waving to the carver, and his friends and family that had come out to join in the price discussions. “Those are the start of my West African shopping. Here’s to a lot more,” I said, toasting AJ with James’s plastic cup. “I love them.”

“Quirky, but practical, right?” He’d heard that from me before, my favourite type of thing.

“Yip. Just like you,” I said, winking at him.

12. Cecile

I heard Nickson open the gates, and talk to somebody who was coming into the garden, so I went outside to see.

“Hello,” said the white lady “is Margie here?”

“She is, *Madame*, I will go and call her. I am Cecile, I work here. Please come in.”

“Thanks Cecile. I am Santie, and this is Aretha.” These are the first other women I have met who are here because of the job. Oni told me about them, she is their *domestique*. It’s very kind of them to visit, *Madame* has been looking so happy all day. She was all “Cecile, please squeeze some more juice”, “Cecile, please wipe the outside table”, “Cecile, please make sure there is no dust in the cups.” Like I would ever leave dust in the cups. *Madame* must have heard us because she came outside.

“Hi, you must be Santie and Aretha. I’m Margie, and have you met Cecile?”

“Yes, we’ve just introduced ourselves. How lovely to see you.”

“And you too! Thank you for making the effort. I’ve been looking forward to this.”

“I baked you a little something that I thought you might enjoy,” Santie said to Margie, handing over a tart.

“Oh, a milk tart! You wonderful woman! That’s so thoughtful. Just what my mother would have done.” Margie reached across and hugged Santie. For a minute there, I thought *Madame* was going to cry. It looked like she was biting her tongue. But she pulled herself together and showed the others in towards the house.

We sat outside at the wooden table on the veranda, or rather, they sat and I went in to prepare the tea. I had to wash that table twice earlier because *Madame*, I was learning, didn’t like even a speck of dirt on anything. That was quite difficult to do, considering that it was the *Harmattan*, the season where the desert wind blows sand over everything for many months.

She had even given me a special soap to use when I washed my hands, she said it would make sure that the babies don’t get sick. I was not sure how, but I wanted to keep her happy, so I just did it. I couldn’t even prepare the tray earlier, because *Madame* said that the sand would stick on it. She always seems so worried. It must be a very dirty place where she came from.

I took the tea to them, and when I turned to leave, *Madame* asked me to join them at the table. This is the first time that's happened. Then up *Madame* jumped again, no sitting still today, I think she was too excited, and also a little nervous. She went off to get James. So it was just me and the visitors. I didn't want to be rude, so I didn't look them in the eyes; instead I looked over into the garden, and waited. I think maybe they felt a bit awkward too, because *Madame* Santie and I both started to talk at the same time, then both stopped, then started again.

"Pardon, *Madame*. You first."

"Have you always lived in Benin, Cecile?"

"Yes, I was born in Parakou, a bit north of Bohicon. My mother and father are still there."

"And do you have any children?"

"Yes, I have two. My firstborn is a daughter, Benedictine, she has twenty four years. My last born, Osiamé, has twenty years. They both live with me." We all looked up then as *Madame* came back outside with James. She introduced him to Aretha and *Madame* Santie, who said something in her South African language and held out her arms. James, he went straight to her and sat on her lap. I've never seen him do that before. She spoke baby talk and poked his tummy and tickled him and he laughed.

"Goodness, look at that," *Madame* said. "You've got the touch! Do you have children, or grandchildren?"

"Yes, I have also got two children but they're much older. Similar to Cecile's actually. My daughter is twenty six, and my son is twenty."

"Oh, our last borns are the same age," I say. "My boy, he is a very good boy. My husband is late, so he's had to be the man in the house. I don't think it's easy for him, he is struggling to find work. But something will come up, I know it will. And for now he says he's job is to look after me."

"You're very lucky to have such a good boy," she replied. "I haven't been quite so lucky. My boy tries to be good, but it's not always easy for him. And not always so easy for me either." She laughed a little, but it sounded strange, not like she thought it was funny.

Mde Santie, she didn't look at anyone when she spoke about her son, she just looked at James. I think she was seeing another child on her lap. From her memories of long ago.

"And what about you, Aretha, all this baby talk. Do you have children too, or are we boring you to death?" *Madame* asked her.

"No, it's ok. Me, I like children. I have not my own yet, but my cousins at home, they have some children, so I am very used to them."

I looked over at Mde Santie while the other two were talking. She was wearing a pretty dress, appropriate for a lady her age. Not like the short pants that *Madame* wears all the time. That is not suitable for a married woman. Her dress was a bit stretched in places, but a woman must make sure that she is ample. Her hair is grey-ish with big curls. She has a line of white in the front, like she saw a spirit and got a fright, or maybe at one time she was very worried about something, and her hair took on the worry.

Madame asked me to refill the teapot while she went to get Michaela. The conversation turned to babies again when *Madame* introduced her. We laughed at Michaela's dark hair with the wet sweaty curls that stick to her little head. I think they are struggling with the heat. Wait until after the rains, then they are going to feel hot. Even we feel hot then. *Madame* Santie was still holding James, who was properly awake now. He was looking at her with more interest now, fiddling gently with her necklace, and fingering the lacy edges of her dress. I watched her feed him that tart and him lapping up every teaspoon she gently fed him. And him, the picky eater.

13. Margie

I cleared my throat, started to say something, then stopped and drank from my teacup instead. I shook my head to clear my anxiety, then started again. "Can I ask you two something quite personal?" I turned to the others.

Cecile had gone to talk to Nickson who had come over to call her. All this small talk seemed so insignificant when I wanted to ask them about real stuff.

"How's it going for you both? Are you coping with this move? How do you feel about being here? I can't quite get used to it, I feel like I am constantly in a daze. None of this seems real, it's certainly not what I expected. And the heat is spacing me out." I knew this was coming out in a gush, but I couldn't stop.

"It drains me, and I have absolutely no energy, and the kids are so busy, I need to keep going but sometimes I just can't. I'm exhausted most of the time."

"It is very comforting for me to hear you say that," Santie said softly. "I keep thinking it, but I don't want to tell my husband Jaco. Shame, he's got enough on his plate without dealing with me complaining too. You're very brave, you young people, you know how to talk to others about how you're feeling. This is not easy for me."

"I'm not sure what I expected, but I think something a little more romantic. The reality is very different," I replied.

"It's not so bad for me," said Aretha. "Is quite the same to Tanzania, but I miss my people. Also the French. I cannot speak it. This is the difficult part."

"Yes, French is very difficult. I did classes for three months before I came here, but I am still struggling. I guess that bit I can learn."

"You know, it is not easy living here, but when there is no choice in the matter, then we must just be strong and keep on going."

"Well, we did have a choice, and we chose here. I was looking for a new beginning, a fresh start. But now I am wondering if maybe I have bitten off more than I can chew." I stopped myself fiddling with my teaspoon, and set it down on the plate with a clunk.

"I didn't think I would miss my friends so much. And other young kids around for mine to play with." I laughed. "Silly, I know."

There's something about living in obscure places that makes meeting other people so much more intense. It's like there's no time for the mundane. I was desperate to find someone I could ask for advice, someone who would understand why I was finding this all so much more difficult than I had thought. Someone, well, someone like my mother would be great.

"I must say that I never thought that I would miss speaking quite so much," I said. "I haven't had a decent conversation with an English speaking woman in three weeks and I never realised how I would miss it. It's not something I've ever thought about before. I find it quite bizarre that of all the things I miss, conversation is right up there!"

"I miss my programmes," said Santie. "I have a very good friend back home and we watched the soaps together, and now not being able to watch them, I miss both my real friends and the ones I made on the TV. Jaco doesn't understand, he thinks I am crazy to watch them in the first place, but it's real you know. I feel like they're all carrying on without me."

"I know exactly what you mean! I leave the TV on all day, and watch the 24 hour webcams from the Big Brother house. Isn't that so very desperate? I just can't help it though, they've become my lifeline back to the world I know. I don't know this world, I feel like I am looking in on a strange woman's life, not my own. I'm not even sure where my life went."

"I don't think it's desperate," Santie said, stroking James's head lovingly and smiling down at him. "I think you're very brave bringing these children here. I would love to spend some more time with you, and get to know you all a bit better. That's if you wouldn't mind hanging around with an old aunty like me," she said tentatively. She looked at me almost shyly then, and recognizing our mutual needs for company and conversation, I smiled at her.

"I'd love that. Thank you. I know it will get better, I've only been here for a few weeks. It's just that I'm normally pretty good at adapting to new places, but this time, I'm taking some strain."

14. Santie

You know, sitting there today was one of the best days and one of the worst days, all rolled into one. Isn't it funny how your heart can be pumping so much happiness and at the same time, squeeze the sadness so hard that it hurts. That's how it was today when I met Margie and Cecile.

Sitting with that little boy on my lap, a soft, warm little body that just moulded into mine even though we had never met and he was still waking up. Seeing him like that, all sleepy and innocent, just took me straight back to when I used to sit with my own little boy on my lap. When he was still innocent, and would come to me when he had just woken up, to cuddle for a few minutes. And he would tell me that I smelled pretty, and would snuffle his nose into my neck a little further. And now that little boy, all grown up; when he's sniffing, it's not my perfume. When he's touching, it's not me anymore, only stuff that doesn't belong to him.

I heard about Cecile's son, the same age as my Stefan, and heard how good he sounds, like such a decent kid waiting for his future to start, and I wonder why my son didn't turn out like that? Her son is poor and grew up with nothing but he can still look after his mother. She is a lucky woman. She must have been a very good mother to him.

Don't tell Jaco that I am telling you this. He gets so cross. But I know he thinks it too, he just never says it out aloud. It comes out in his dreams sometimes, that and the other things, but he never says them to me. I just wonder how different Jaco and my lives would be if Stefan had stuck to the normal road, as it were. You know, finished school, studied at a college somewhere, got a good job where he could work with his hands.

I always told him, get a job where you work with your hands, and you will always be able to earn a good living. Did I tell him that? Yes I did. Maybe I told him too often.

I was in our bedroom tonight when Jaco came home from work. Aretha was doing the cooking, humming in the kitchen. I would have messed up the food today, it would have tasted of bile and bitterness. Cooking is like that you know, what you think about when you cook is the flavour that gets added to the food.

The life had been sucked out of me tonight, and her humming was getting into my ears like a mosquito buzzing, and I couldn't switch it off and I couldn't hide from her. I had to put my head under the pillow to try and stop it, and that's when Jaco came in. He said what the hell, and I got a fright and sat up quickly and tried to smooth my dress down a bit, so I didn't look as crumpled as I felt.

He said what was wrong and that I looked like I was sitting under a black rain cloud, and when I wiped that tear away, then he got a fright and realised that maybe something was really wrong. Was I sick, he wanted to know? He said he thought I was going to be happy tonight because he had organised a car and a driver to take me to meet Margie, and to bring me home, and now here I was sitting on my bed and crying. With the pillow over my head, at that.

And if that was the way I was going to act, then he wasn't doing that again. He sounded cross with me. Maybe he thought I was being ungrateful, but I'm not, I really am not. It's just hard to be grateful about a car ride when it drives you to a place that makes you realise exactly how much you have lost.

Tonight, even though I tried, I couldn't stop crying about all those lost things. I have lost my boy. I lost him to his own decisions, and lost him to drugs and stealing and lying and cheating. I have lost him to the point that, in my darkest times, I have to admit to myself that I am not sure that I would want him back because he has hurt me so much.

I have lost a chance for him to have a wife, and me to have a daughter-in-law that I can teach to cook and look after him like I thought he liked being looked after. And I have lost the chance of him having a child of his own, so that I can be an *Ouma* and have my own grandchild on my knee, and not someone else's.

As I counted up all the things I had lost, I could hear funny sounds coming out of me, and the room started to go blurry, and I just couldn't stop the tears running down my cheeks, and dissolving my mascara and making my eyes sting and running through my powder and dripping off my jaw and making light brown spots form on the sheets. And then I felt Jaco holding me, and while his arms are strong and his chest is still hard, it is too hard for me to break in, to get inside him, to see what is going on in his heart. To see if it is also shattering like mine is now.

And so I allowed Jaco to undress me, even though I normally turn off the light when I get into my pyjamas. Tonight, the power had gone out of me, and I needed him to pull on my

nightie over my head, and to pull back the sheets, and to let me curl up in bed. Just me. Me alone. Me alone with my memories of what my little boy had been, and what I had so hoped he would become, and what I knew he was.

15. Margie

Yesterday started like all the others. Hot, sticky, and with the night watchman shouting greetings to someone passing on the street. Shouting from outside my window. Never a good way for me to wake up. Deep red flashed. I'm not the best morning person, and it felt like I had only just gone to sleep again after Michaela's feed.

"Damn it, I am going to fire that man if he does that one more time!" I curse into my pillow. The metal gates squeak and clang as he opens them to catch up with his friend, leaving for the night. Every morning we go through this. Silence again, and I doze off as it starts to get lighter outside.

"Also got to get some blackout curtains," I grumble. AJ acknowledges these things with a grunt. He knows I hate being woken up.

"While you're getting them, please make the tea," he chances. I feign sleep, but then need the loo, so that's my sleep over. I pad through to the bathroom, the tiles cool on my feet. I am loving these clean tiles. I spot the gecko sticking his head out from behind the bathroom cabinet. We're getting used to each other, me and him, with his big suckery toes and black eyes sitting on top of his head.

"You get the tea, I might as well shower. I'm awake now." The shower still intrigued me, the floor of the bathroom simply sloped downhill to a drain in the corner. There was no shower curtain, or door of any kind. Or anything to stop the water spraying everywhere. The whole bathroom got wet and slippery every time either of us showered. But it was quaint, and unusual.

By the time Nickson arrived, I was all fired up. I went around to his office, as AJ called it. The second carport at the back of the house, furnished with a low table, a comfy chair, oil stains on the floor and two shelves on the wall. The shelves were choccers with tins and jars holding bits and pieces of metal, and nuts and some small tools. He was always fixing his bike. It never worked, but just having it put him up a notch. He's quite the top dog around here.

"Good morning Nickson, how are you today?"

"No, fine *Madame*. Fine. Did you sleep well?"

“Very well thanks. Except for your friend who was here last night. Please Nickson, you must ask him to only start talking to his friends when he is past that gate, not when he is still at my window. Tell him that the *Madame* gets very cross when she is woken up with all the shouting. And when he opens the gate, he must do it quietly. Not like the thunder. If Michaela wakes up again when he bangs the gate next time, then I’m going to get him to come and put her back to sleep.” Much laughing at that. I was being serious.

“I will tell him, *Madame*.”

Broom in his hand, he started sweeping the garden.

"Nickson, the leaves can wait for now, I have a more important job for you today. I think we should find some friends to play with James. Please will you go across the road and see if there are children that want to come and play with him.”

“Come inside and play here?”

“Yes. There are always so many children who look in through the walls, can’t some of them come in and play? You choose who you think is going to play nicely.”

I wondered if he got my subliminal messages. Pick the right kids. Not too big for him. Not kids that are going to hurt him or steal his toys. Nickson was shaking his head, and muttering to himself. Looked out into the road, then down at the dirt that should be swept, and sucked on his teeth. I couldn't decide if I did or didn't want to know what he was thinking.

He stepped out into the road, and shouted something to the others out there. They burst out laughing and what sounded like teasing came back. Nickson said something crossly and the teasing stopped. He was tall, in his mid thirties, and had clout in the area. James, who had been following the whole conversation, went to stand on a rock to be able to see Nickson through the wall. His excitement a lime green aura, palpable, and my heart skipped a beat. I was excited too. This was what it is all about. My kids meeting local kids, sharing the universal language of play. And still within my boundaries. My kids going where I was struggling..

Nickson brought back one little boy, who was quivering, rabbit in the headlights. *Are we this scary?* I had thought they would want to play with all the toys, when I saw how little they have. But this little guy was plain terrified, and just stood looking at James. James, on the other hand, was ecstatic. He switched his peak around, dude-style, and ran down the driveway kicking his new soccer ball and shouting enthusiastically. Calling his new friend to come and join him. Little legs pumping. The next minute he tripped over his ball and fell

headlong, over outstretched arms, stopping himself with his nose, and leaving a whole lot of skin and all his pride on the driveway. Grazed hands and knees, a bruised forehead bloody nose, and a lot of embarrassment. His tears built up into great big racking sobs. The little friend was still standing, watching; overwhelmed. The gate was opened from the outside, and a woman came in. He fled to the safety of her arms, and so ended playdate one.

I took James inside to patch him up, with plasters and kisses. Soothed the sobbing body and the disappointment. I turned the TV on for him, and let Barney do his thing. Then I went to my room, sat on my bed, and let my sobs rack my body. It had been a long time since I had cried like this, so hard that it hurt, and I couldn't breathe.

The irony was that last time I was crying had been about a little boy as well. Only this time, it wasn't so bad. Not nearly as bad. *What are we doing to him?* Taking him away from everything he knows and bringing him here where there're no other white children and no one can speak to him and no one understands what he is saying. Could I simply call it a bad decision and jump on the next plane back home? Not be stuck in the middle of absolutely nowhere, where it was dirty and poor and we were such complete outsiders and people kept on staring at us. *I give up, I'll never be able to make the next four years. Forget the new start, I'll take my old life again. I can't even manage four weeks.*

A purple fug enveloped me, the colour of bruises. I reached into the back of my bedside drawer, and took out one of the tablets that my friend had packed in for me. For in case of emergencies, she had said. And she had a bad case of the baby blues, so she knows her stuff. And it was safe while breastfeeding, she told me. She'd done her homework.

By the time Cecile got to work, she's heard about all the commotion from the others outside.

"*Madame*, what is happening? Is James ok?"

"James is fine now, thanks."

"You don't look ok *Madame*. Would you like some tea?" I nodded, and bit my lip to stem the tears again. Kindness does that to me too.

When she came back, she had Michaela up and dressed, tied to her back with a length of colourful fabric. "I am going to my cousin now, his son can come and play here."

"Thanks Cecile. You can leave Michaela here with me."

“It’s okay. I’ll take her for a walk. Do her good to get some fresh air.” There was a whole lot she wasn’t saying in that. I could sense it.

“*Madame* mustn’t ask Nickson to find friends. He’s a man, what does he know about this? *Madame* must think carefully about these things. Now I hear James was crying, and you’re crying. It’s no good at all.” And with that, she left.

16. Margie

I heard the rhyme that all the kids know being chanted at the gate. The one about greeting the white man. “*Jovo! Jovo! Bon soir! Ça va bien? Merçi!*” White people here are called Jovo’s. Pronounced Yorvor. It took a while to get used to what they were saying. I guessed that meant that the kids Cecile went to find had arrived. I was at the point where I ignored all the calling and talking at our gate – but this singing sounded really sweet, and we’d been expecting them. James was mixed between nerves after that last fiasco, and excitement at having other kids around. Me too.

When Cecile opened the gate and spoke to the lady there, the two little boys and a little girl rushed in, and started playing with the first things they found. James, being two and still licking his wounds, got defensive and ran around trying to reclaim his favourites. He was getting angry and shouting, but of course none of them understood what he was saying. *Oh boy, please let this go well. I need this to go well.*

Cecile, bless her, sized up what was happening, and shouted something to the three visitors. They looked longingly at the toys, then at each other, and one little boy said something to the others, and they all walked over to the three of us. Cecile introduced them to me formally. The biggest boy was Ezekiel, a confident sassy little boy of four and he seemed to be the ring leader. Then there was Clairdor, a little boy with laughing eyes and a mischievous grin which revealed a missing front tooth. He was the one that convinced the others to listen to Cecile and come and greet me. He won my heart straight away, with that lop-sided smile.

Amalie was the little girl, with her hair in plaits and her prettiest dress on, white with ribbons and lace, *in this heat and dust?* and bows in her hair. She and Clairdor were dressed impeccably, how did they stay so clean? And how often do their mothers have to scrub their clothes? James was filthy every morning by nine. AJ was giving me a hard time about being ridiculous, trying to keep him clean, so I’ve had to let him get dirty now, play outside barefoot and shirtless. I’ve agreed to that, but only in our garden.

I told myself that I can still manage this situation. Inside our walls, it was just dusty, there were no broken bottles to cut him, or old cans with rusty edges. Or dirty stinking muddy pools, like out there. So I had to settle for a long bath every night for the two of them. With antibacterial soap.

The lady that came with them was Clairdor's mother, and she left then, after finishing her conversation with Cecile. Cecile told me afterwards that she had said it was okay for her son to play here, that she was happy with the house and with me. That put me back in my box.

The kids politely greeted me and shook hands with James. He was thoroughly confused by this ceremony and stood gazing at them.

“They are greeting you, James. Come on, shake hands like this.” Cecile showed him how to do it and to introduce himself to them. “It is good that you get to meet your neighbours. That you get to know some people from here.” I sensed a message being sent to me in that. As subtle as our metal gate.

“Is it alright if the children play with some of your toys? They have come to play with you, to be your new friends. Will you show them some things?”

He nodded, unsure of how this was all supposed to work. James looked at the others and started to talk. They didn't understand what he was saying, but they understood the ball in his hand. Ezekiel pointed to it, and that's all it took. They ran off together, throwing the ball and trying to catch it.

After a while, Cecile said to James, “Come, I'll push you on your scooter.” She spoke to the others, and they dashed for the other bike. Soon all four of them were on the two bikes, racing along the paving around the house. I watched Cecile and felt a pang of guilt. It must be exhausting for her, what with Michaela on her back, and running around after the other four. Part of me thought she was trying to prove her point about me asking Nickson to find friends. The other part of me wondered when I turned so bitchy. Good angel, bad angel, and both of them shouting in my ears. She was saving me here. She was keeping me from going crazy. When did I turn into this nasty person? When did I go from competent and independent to incompetent and completely dependent?

Truth be told, she was very much in charge, the kids were playing together beautifully and Michaela on her back was looking very content. It seemed so simple for all of them. What was stopping me from letting it be so simple for me?

17. Santie

You know, something I haven't told you yet is that I really like to crochet. I have been doing it for so long that I don't even need to look at the hook anymore, I can just get lost in my head, only me and my thoughts.

This is sometimes very handy, but the problem is that I didn't think to bring anything with me. No hooks and no wool, so now I need to go out and find some. Even though it is always so difficult to go out and shop, I really have to do this. Today. Or else I am going to go stark raving.

Last night, Jaco opened a bottle of wine with our supper, and offered it around to everyone. I had a little glass, but no-one else did, so it ended up that Jaco had another glass with his supper, then another, and then finished off the bottle when he was talking to Dennis after supper.

They were talking about home, and where they had worked and travelled for different jobs, and then, like it always does, where they were stationed in the army during the war. That's the South African border war. I know what's coming after nights like this. Usually, it starts with talking in his sleep, then he gets twitchy, and that's when I usually wake up. That's so that I am out of bed by the time the fighting starts with the enemy, but last night, the unseen enemy attacked suddenly, and I was still in bed when he started punching and kicking and then he tried to strangle me.

"Jaco! Jaco! Stop it! It's me. Jaco! It's Santie!" I was trying to get through to him, to wake him up. Something must have got through, because he did wake up then, but the killing was still in his eyes. It was still there, the hate and the power and his strong hands were tight around my neck.

The light flashed on and the next minute Dennis was in our room, shouting at Jaco, and diving at him, knocking him off balance, off me, off the bed. They landed hard on the floor, Dennis talking all the time, and Jaco coming to. Realizing what he had done. Looking at Dennis on top of him, and the penny dropping, and quietening down. He turned away from Dennis, and went slack, the fight leaving his body. Dennis helped him up, and they sat on the

bed together while I went out to make myself some tea. Dennis came into the kitchen on his way back to bed.

“You okay?” he asked, and gave me a gentle pat on my shoulder. I don’t think he knew what else to do.

“I’ll be alright. I just need a bit of space for a minute.” I put my hand over his, and squeezed it.

“This happen before?”

I nodded. He looked at me for a minute, then nodded too.

He has very little memory of what happened last night, but me, I remember everything. Jaco is acting like a little duckling, so meek and mild today. It’s the drink that brings it on, and he knows it. He knows what he did isn’t acceptable, but he can’t seem to stop it.

So when I mentioned, only softly, that I wanted to start crocheting, he didn’t say anything but he saw the bruises that were forming on my neck, and he arranged for a company car to come and fetch me and take me to the market. I don’t know what he had to do to get that right so fast, but a driver came quite early this morning, no waiting this time.

Aretha and I piled into the car, an old Passat with no aircon and windows that didn’t work, so they have been pushed down right to the bottom and that’s where they are going to stay. Until their dying day, as that song goes. Oni came too, and sat in front with Sifuel, and the two of them started a very loud conversation, over the already very loud music that he was playing. We sped along to the market, and I battled to breathe in the rush of hot air coming in, with all the dust. It was swirling around the car, and getting into our eyes. I looked at Aretha, also struggling with it, and then we both started to laugh. I think she was laughing at me, but I laughed too as we pass the deserted trucks and cars left in the road to rust, the goats and chickens standing in the empty space where the windscreens used to be.

We arrive at the market, and Oni talks to Sifuel, telling him when to fetch us. It all seems like chaos to me, but Oni seems to know exactly where to head for the crochet needles and wool. Everywhere I look, there are these falling down roofs made of plaited palm leaves with their wares laid out on rickety benches. These women just look at me as I walk past, and Oni keeps up a running commentary with them even though she is already past them and walking away. Oni seems to have lost the material shop; we are walking down lots of side streets and she

keeps looking around the corners and talking to the people who are selling stuff. It's starting to get hot, and I've got a scarf wrapped around my neck to hide the marks, which is making me sweat. I'm getting irritated with her now.

And then, all of a sudden, this man rides towards us, on a bicycle hidden under a mountain of fabric. It looks so funny, a real travelling salesman. The piles and piles of fabric neatly folded on the back of his bicycle and held down with bicycle stretchies. It's a bit dusty around the edges, but I am amazed that he manages to stay upright and actually pedal the old thing with all the material and the other stuff on.

On his front handle bars and cross bar were pinned underpants, socks, bras and panties for sale - right there for anybody to see you buying your fancies in the middle of the street. Not me, no thank you. I'm not buying my underwear from a man's handlebars. I'm not sure how he managed to find space to sit on the bicycle himself, what with all these D and E cups whipping around. The lucky thing is that he had some crochet hooks for sale, so Oni did the bargaining for us and bought them for us.

So now we had the hooks, but no cotton. Oni talked to him, and he gave directions to another shop. Finally we got the shop that sold cotton, the good stuff, pure cotton that looks like wool, not the thin embroidery thread that I am used to at home. Oni said that they grow cotton here in Benin, and I could see a lady in the back spinning some fluffy fibre into the yarn. I can't usually afford pure cotton in South Africa, but here it is so cheap that I can make lots of things.

I will start with a doily just so I can show Aretha how. She said to me this morning that she needs to start collecting gifts to give to Andreas's family when they go to Denmark sometime, and I think a doily is the right thing. They are so easy to make, I can do it while I talk to Aretha. And until the air clears and I can look Jaco in the face again.

18. Margie

"It was lovely to see Dennis last night. Nice man, good to see him again after all these years." We were bathing the kids, after being at the bar, catching up with Dennis who AJ had worked with years before. That was when AJ was a young engineer, fresh out of university, and Dennis had taken him under his wing, and showed him the ropes on site.

"He's really good with James. Shame, must miss his grandkids. And you can see he is comfortable carrying a baby. I'm looking forward to spending more time with him."

"Out you get and shake it, shake it, shake it!" AJ lifted James out and did their shake dry ritual, James squealing and laughing as the water flew off him.

"Let's go to that place that Dennis was talking about, tomorrow. I need to get out of this house, and it sounds decent enough."

"And rubadub rubadub rubadub." Little head getting lost under the big towel.

"AJ, are you listening to me at all?"

"Of course. Sure. Coffee tomorrow. Dennis's place." He winked at me, as he bundled James over his shoulder and carried him off to the bedroom.

"Smart arse," I muttered, smiling.

We set off mid-morning the next day on a quest to find Chez Monique, the coffee shop that Dennis had described. The problem was that in that area, there were no street signs, and no logical structure to the roads, so giving directions was tricky. The conversation had gone something like this:

"Do you know where the soccer field is in Abomey?"

"No. Is it near the market?"

"No, but you can see the water tank from it."

"Ok, so it must be the Palace side."

"Yes, that's it. You pass the Palace, turn off the main road as if you're going to the palace. And then you need to find the soccer field there, not the one in the stadium, the gravel one. There should be a game on, there always is on a Saturday. Just wind down your window, and listen for the noise."

"And if there's no game and no noise?"

He laughed. “Just ask someone there. It’s very close to the soccer field, if the field is on your right.”

“We’ve got a Lonely Planet, I’ve seen it marked in there, so we’ll follow that sketch map.”

“Also, just look for lots of trees, you’ll find it.”

It was another hot Saturday, with the dry air full of possibility. The grey skies looked overcast, but the rains weren’t due for another month or so, and the greyness was all the Saharan sand being blown south by the Harmattan. We’d cranked up the aircon in the car, and set out looking for an adventure.

We hadn’t been to the Palace yet - the Royal Palace of Abomey, a UNESCO Heritage site I’d read about. It’s where the rulers of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey had lived, and was still well preserved apparently. It’s where the legendary Amazon women’s army had been based, and was definitely on my list of things to do. Abomey was officially about ten kilometers east of Bohicon, but the towns had grown into each other. Abomey is historic, Bohicon – where we live – is on the main north south highway, so it’s newer and busier.

Saturday mornings, when we had AJ around and a car to travel in, were planned for weeks ahead, with all the things I wanted to see. Mostly, I just needed to get out of the house. That day, we got lost, of course, one road looked like the next which looked like the next. Through the maze of dirt tracks that pass for roads, trying to find Dennis's elusive coffee place. We drove around for what seemed like ages. We had turned in past the palace, but couldn’t find anything that resembled a soccer field, and with no street signs, things were difficult to find.

“Let’s ask someone,” I suggested, looking around for a single person. Crowds had started to make me nervous, what with all the touching and talking and not understanding.

“No, it’s got to be here somewhere. We’re in the right area, let’s just drive around more.”

I turned around to look at Michaela, who was starting to get fidgety. Her car seat was on the sunny side, and she was sweating already. James was talking talking talking. When he starts to jabber away, he’s hungry, and the hungrier he gets the more he talks.

“Shush Boy! Just be quiet for a bit, let Mom look around.”

“Leave him, Margs. He’s excited.”

“He can be excited quietly. He needs some food. Where’s this place? Please let’s stop and ask someone.”

“What are you going to say? And how are you going to understand when they answer?”

“I don’t know. I’ll figure it out. Here, ask this woman. She looks nice enough, and she’s on my side.” I went over the French phrases in my head.

AJ slowed to a stop as we approached her. She was elegant in her long dress and headscarf. From the safety of the car, her bright fabric patterns of green and orange triangles set off her dark black skin, and looked fun and light-hearted in the midday sun. Orange rubber flip flops protected her feet from the hot stones of the road. *Those flip flops!* Such an elaborate outfit, complete with a regal headscarf, and then cheap plastic shoes. And they were everywhere.

She looked at us with interest, as I wound down my window. I greeted her, and she stepped closer, her eyes crinkling in confusion. I repeated my greeting, hoping that maybe she just didn’t hear me, not that I had screwed up my French. She came closer to the car door, and as she felt the cool air-conditioned air, she exclaimed and stuck her hand into the car, over my lap. I recoiled, and covered my bag on my lap with both arms. She looked at me again, contempt on her face, and withdrew her hand. She said something in the local language and waved her arm around, letting me know exactly what she thought of me.

Shit. It was a stupid thing to do, and I knew I couldn’t undo it. I cast down my eyes, and tried to show sorry with my hands. Angry, she was still going off.

“Pardon. Pardon.” I said, hoping I could get her to calm down. I forgot that the locals don’t know about air conditioning, and the vents in the car blowing cold air on her hand was a surprise to her. I tried to start again, but then stammered over my words, so skipped the pleasantries and launched straight into asking for directions.

She answered, pointing to the road behind her, and turning as she spoke to look down that road. So I didn’t catch what she was saying, and *I told you this would happen* radiated from AJ. Eventually I thanked her politely, and started to wind up my window, when she moved to the back window and started tapping on the glass at James. From having his nose up against the glass to watch all this, he pushed himself far back into the seat, looking away. Memories obviously flooding back to him.

“He’s shy,” I said by way of excuse, and waved and smiled sheepishly as AJ drove forward. It felt more like a grimace. We turned around, and I waved again as we passed her. *No hard feelings. Sorry my son is petrified of you. Didn’t get a word of what you said. Sorry I thought you were going to steal my handbag.*

I looked down into my lap as my eyes filled with tears. "Let's just go home."

"Now what? Why are you crying?"

"This was supposed to be a fun outing, exploring Abomey, and it's just so frustrating, that's all. Why's it so difficult to do something as simple as find a coffee shop? We're fighting, James is scared of the locals who are simply curious, Michaela's hot and sweaty, I thought she was going to steal my stuff. How can I think that about that lady? I was so stupid! And we still don't know where it is."

"It's got to be here somewhere. You've got to be more patient, and relax. So it takes us a long time to do things. So what? You got anything else urgent planned for today?"

"I don't want to find it, looking like this now. Red eyes and running mascara. We can come back another time."

He turned the car again, cross now. I was pissing him off, although I really wasn't intending to. I didn't know what was making me act like that. Pulling away too fast, gravel spat up from under the heavy tyres and dust lifted into the air. I put my head down as we passed the lady, and as I surreptitiously looked in the mirrors a bit further down the line, I saw her waving the dust away from her face, staring after our car. It made me feel even worse. We were really behaving like shoddy tourists, all about ourselves.

And then of course, we drove right past it. AJ looked at me, and raised his eyebrows. I looked over at the kids, and when James said, "Please Mommy," so innocently, I took a deep breath and nodded my head. I exhaled and laughed, but it sounded like a snort. Bloody Friggin' Murphy. I flipped down my visor and fixed my makeup, my mascara and lipstick soft and melty. I did a quick repair job, then got out and unbuckled Michaela. She was hot and sweaty - her little back sopping as I took her out of her baking car seat.

It was a very inconspicuous wall around Chez Monique, and I hoped I hadn't been building it up in my head. There was only a tiny sign outside, flat against the reddish mud wall; no wonder we had missed it so many times. I had looked it up in my Lonely Planet again the previous night, and read that it was a restaurant and accommodation place, with some animals in an enclosed area for children to see and enjoy. *'The garden has a delightful tropical ambience, exotic birds and straw huts'* the book said. That's what I was hoping for. Bohicon and Abomey so far have been decidedly lacking in *delightful tropical ambience*.

"Come James, let's go see if there are any animals. What do you think are here?"

"Cockadoodle," he said. I was hoping for something a little more exotic, but I looked to where he was pointing. A couple of roosters were pecking in the dust. Not sure what they find to eat, but their feathers caught the sun, shimmering golden and rufus and magenta. The colours of promise. Quite spectacular for such lean scrawny chickens. I noticed the scraps of fabric tied around a leg on each of them. ID tags, Nickson had told me. Each person has their own fabric, and the locals know which belongs to whom.

"Ok, let's leave them now, and go and get a cool drink." I had Michaela in her pouch, strapped to the front of me, and took James by the hand. AJ pushed open the gate, had a quick glimpse inside, then turned to us with a smile.

"What?"

"Come, I think you'll like this," he said, taking James's hand.

I walked in, and caught my breath. It was spectacular. I smelt the dark green comfort, balming to my spirit. The gate led to an enchanted forest in another world. First thing that I noticed was that it was shady, quiet and empty. *Quiet and empty!* I couldn't actually see anyone else. Oh, the ecstasy! The path of freshly raked gravel snaked through a plantation of tall trees, enticing us inwards. *Delightful tropical ambience – check.*

I love forests, they are where I feel most at ease, protected I suppose. It's got something to do with the hushed tones, damped by the trunks and canopy and leaves littering the floor. That and the lush growth of the ferns and the foliage growing around the trunks. There was no undergrowth there, only the raked ground, but at least that showed care and attention. I wondered what trees they were. The long, elegant trunks grew straight up, with broad leaves, and very few branches. Must be good for furniture. Not many knots in the wood. It was shady and cool amongst the trees, and I felt my shoulders dropping. My shoulders go up and down with my stress levels, I don't know when I'm doing it, I'm only conscious of it when I relax, and they drop. The knots in my trunk.

"These are teak trees apparently." He always did that. Answered the questions in my head, and haven't yet asked out loud. He lead us down a path, towards one of the thatched bomas in the garden. *Straw huts – check.* This was tropical African paradise at its best, and unlike anything I had ever seen in Benin before. The calm eye in the tornado of where we live. Surreal and fantastical and magical; it smelt a shimmering, verdant green.

The red clay paths meandered between the trees. Here and there were statues, Voodoo gods, carved out of wood, and decorated with cowry shells and beads and indigo dyed fabric.

I'd read about this common West African fabric, but hadn't seen it yet. There were five or six other thatched bomas around in the forest. Each had a concrete floor, a long dining table and chairs, and a lounge suite. I hesitated for just a second, before AJ took my hand and pulled me down into the comfort of the plush velveteen couches. I looked down at our hands, then up at him, and smiled. He smiled back, and leaned over to kiss my cheek. He knew how sitting on that couch that had been sat on by so many others, who probably used hairspray too, freaked me out. Having James crawl all over it. And I guessed he was trying to say that he knew and understood. *But he doesn't accept, so he's here to help me do it.*

A quiet man appeared and greeted us. Introduced himself and shook our hands. I made a conscious effort to hold on to his hand, like I hadn't with all the others before, because I was feeling the love, and squashing the germ thoughts. We introduced ourselves, and the children, and he spent a few moments chatting to James, and holding Michaela's hands, tickling her. We ordered coffee and fizzy grapefruit juice for James, his new favourite. I leaned over, and fished out a sanitizing wipe from Michaela's nappy bag, and wiped her hands before she put them in her mouth. AJ watched me as I wiped and wiped her hands clean, but he said nothing. That's a risk I just couldn't take though. Not again. Even with him there, trying to help. It's not up for discussion.

When the coffee tray came, we saw the hot water, a tin of instant coffee, a tin of ideal milk and a box of sugar cubes. We waited for him to pour our coffee, but he simply held his hands together, bowed slightly and left us. AJ and I looked at each other, and burst out laughing. It broke the last of the tension, and felt good.

"Why, *Madame*, can I pour you some coffee?" AJ teased.

"How kind of you, my good man!"

DIY coffee that, but hot and sweet and rich and creamy and all that was good.

I fed Michaela as AJ and James wandered around the grounds, looking for the animals. They discovered an enclosure containing a few little bush buck, and a tortoise or two. There was also a large covered area where local crafts men were plying their trade or shooting the breeze or playing that game that they all seem to play. They also sold their crafts in the little craft shop and I took Michaela to join the boys in the shop when she was sated. I eyed a rocking elephant, the most exquisite thing I had seen for a long time: an enormous elephant carved from a single tree trunk, with the bottom curved for rocking. Rocking horses for some,

rocking elephants, rhino and hippos there. Beautiful crafts, and I felt happier than I had for ages.

I was definitely better when AJ was around. He took some of the pressure of being a good parent off me. We left the craft shop and stepped outside into the bright sunshine again, and on the veranda we met *Madame* Monique herself. A voluptuous, regal woman dressed in impeccable local clothes, sitting on a huge throne, also carved from a single, solid tree trunk. She seemed prosperous and powerful. She was also gracious and generous, and called to someone in the back. A minute later, she pressed a small carved wooden rhino into James's hand. She admired the children and we admired her wonderful oasis. I was feeling all the love and kindness, and promised to return soon. I sensed this was going to become a special spot for me, that teak plantation with its bizarre statues, laid-back crafters and wonderful coffee. A happy place.

University of Cape Town

19. Santie

I would have thought that by now, after the three months that we've been here, we would have seen everything, but my goodness! There are still new things to see and do - all the time it seems like. And to me, a little old housewife from South Africa. But here, well, here these strange things seem to be called everyday life.

Take today for an example. My neighbour at home would never believe all the things that happened to me in just one day. I hope she's sitting in her comfy chair, because it is just like a soap opera here. I will only tell Susanna half of the things, and maybe a little watered down, because I don't want her to worry too much about us. We're fine here, her dad and me. Just fine. It was that phone call I got from Margie that started it.

"Hello Thelma, you ready to take on the town?" I didn't know who it was, and there was no Thelma here.

"It's Louise," the voice carried on, and then the penny dropped. I laughed.

"Hello Margie! This is a nice surprise. Why are we Thelma and Louise?"

"Because it's a girls' day out. I've got a car that we can use, how's that?!"

"A car! Of your own? How did that happen?"

"I'll tell you all about it just now. Cecile and I are going to the market. I need to buy some meat, and I wondered if you and Aretha wanted to come? Should I come fetch you?"

And so that's how we went to the butchery in the market by ourselves. For the first time. Our domestics always buy our meat for us, but now we can do it ourselves, and it'll be so much easier. We don't have to set a time for the driver to pick us up. I could hardly wait to find out the details.

The lucky fish. One of the engineers has bought a car for himself for the weekend. I am not sure why he needs a car that he can't use his work pickup for, but who am I to ask? Anyway, he said to Margie that in exchange for her keeping it under her carport during the week, she can use it whenever she wants to. I am trying not to be too envious but I am not sure that I am doing too well.

It is a little bit awkward to have Cecile with us always, but she helps Margie a lot with the children and there is no way José that we could have done what we did today without her. I

like to spend time with Margie, because I can talk in Afrikaans. I don't have to think of English words to use like I must do with Aretha. Margie is in such a different age and stage, it's like becoming friends with my daughter's friends, so it's a bit strange, but beggars can't be choosers. Ai, I miss my neighbour and my other friends.

It was very funny driving out of our driveway this morning. We had the security guard running along next to the car directing Margie all the way down the road that leads into our complex, and then just like that, he ran into the middle of the road. We slammed on brakes, not that we were going very fast, but we got such a fright when he did that stupid thing, and Margie was already nervous.

The next thing we see he is lifting up his hand and stopping the traffic for us so that Margie can turn into the road and then pointing which way she must drive down the main road. My word, we laughed. And you know how it is when a whole lot of women start to laugh together. It gets funnier and funnier, until your tummy bounces and your sides hurt. The cars were hooting and the zemi drivers were shouting and showing rude signs, and our security guard was doing it all right back. That man is one brave man.

"We started laughing when we tried to leave this morning too. It was like changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace, such pomp and ceremony. Somehow, the people in our street heard that we were going out, driving ourselves. I don't know how, Nickson I suppose."

"Ai, that man, he talks too much," Cecile added her two cents worth.

"He asked me where I was going when I changed into my town clothes." She was looking rather fancy, her top and long skirt matching her headscarf twisted high on her head.

"Next minute, all the staff were there, including those from the houses up and down the road. I had Nickson helping to get the children in the car, Jeffoir the barman directing me out of the driveway, like I can go any way but forward, out the gates. The house boy from two doors up came with some other man to see us off."

"Well, I think you're driving really well. I am not so sure that I could actually drive here, on the wrong side of the road."

"I need to keep thinking which lane I must go into when I turn the corners, but so far so good." You drive on the wrong side of the road here, well, the right hand side, not the left, like we're used to. She got it wrong, once or twice, but was put off by the other cars that were actually driving on our side, so it wasn't her fault.

"You're weaving in and out and around these chickens and goats and children like you've been doing it all your life."

"I'm not quite breathing yet, I'll start again when we get to the market."

“Ok, that’s it, we’re here. I need a good parking spot, I can’t have anything to happen to Benjamin’s car,” Margie said. We ramped up the pavement, gently though, and parked behind a lady selling oranges, piled high in bright green pyramids. That’s an odd thing, the oranges here are green. It took us quite a while to get everyone ready to go in. Margie has to organise the children as surreptitiously as possible, without the market people seeing her too soon. It looked like she was psyching herself up for this. ‘Girding her loins’ as my friend says.

This market still makes me a bit uncomfortable too, with all the people, and them standing so close and the noise and how hot it is. I wear different clothes these days, plain cotton ones. The blends and polyester make me perspire and my clothes stick to me, so I’ve got some new ones at the clothes stalls. It is from the donations from Europe and you can get really designer stuff, for next to nothing. That’s another thing, buying second hand clothes from the side of the street. These are the things that I am not telling the others back home.

“I will go buy James an orange from this woman here.”

“Thanks Cecile. Here’s some coins. Shouldn’t be much should it?”

“No, I will buy it *Madame*,” she said kindly. “He likes the juice. I buy for him often”

“Thanks Cecile, I’m nearly ready.” She said, putting Michaela into her pouch facing in to her.

“I hate them always touching her face and trying to kiss her. Have you ever gone up to a stranger’s baby and kissed it?” She stopped doing what she was doing, and looked up at me. “I can never believe that they actually try it.

“Cecile usually comes and shops for me. These markets always make me very nervous.” Cecile came back with the orange, and I saw her wipe it as much as possible with her hands before giving it to James.

“Ok Thelma,” she said “I’m ready. Now what are the chances of finding Brad Pitt in here?”

When that first lady saw us and screamed and came running towards us, I saw why she was nervous. That’s enough to scare the paint off the walls.

“Is there something wrong, Cecile?” I hadn’t been to the market with them before.

“Nothing wrong, the people just get excited to see the children.” She reached down and picked James up onto her hip. This was just as the lady reached us, with another few hot on

her heels. Margie was going a bit pale, and had this funny look on her face. But she stood still and faced towards the women, like you are told to do if you ever come across a lion in the wild. Or a buffalo. That's how Margie looked now. But she held both of that tiny little girl's hands, I think so that the women couldn't touch them, and let them do all their tickling and laughing and just get it over with.

"They are saying how beautiful the children are." I don't think I would be happy if Susanna did this with my grandchildren, if I had any. Margie seems calm enough on the outside, but I can only guess at what's going on inside. She's told me that this happens every time, I guess I didn't really know how extreme it was. All the women were also touching and pulling James who was smacking the hands away, but that just makes them laugh and do it more.

"Come *Madame*, we must walk." Cecile was talking to the women as we walked away. Just like Oni did that time in the market. That seemed to work because the women don't seem to leave their territory. This is the first time that I have walked right into the middle of the market. I always stick around the edges and Oni buys the other things we need. Everywhere we looked, we were surrounded by the nearly falling down lean-to's, so close together that their palm leaf roofs almost close out the sky light. There are all sorts of things laid out on the nearly falling apart benches; but not fruit and veggies, that seems to be more on the outside.

We passed bike parts, materials and sewing stuff, I must remember this one, but I don't think I will be able to find it again easily in this maze. There was a table full of animal skulls of all sizes, skins and dried parts that I didn't recognise. It stank and the liquids in jars and tails laid in a row scared me. As we passed, a live monkey jumped out, then got jerked back, the chain around its neck too short to let it get to us. James screamed and Cecile ran with him a bit ahead.

"Come quick, we must get away from here."

"What is all that?" I don't like all this hocus pocus stuff.

"This man is Voodun. We mustn't look there. Come, we move now." And then we got to the meat stalls.

"Oh my goodness, the smell! I think I'm going to throw up," Margie says.

I take her arm and turn her away. "You can't. You've got the children here. You've got to set the example for James." I don't know why I said that because it's not really true in this here and now, but it seemed to work anyway. She sorted herself out.

“Just think of it like after a hunt. You’ve never been hunting?”

“No, my meat comes in cellophane from the shop.” I don’t know why I am not that phased by this, but I supposed having uncles with a hunting farm means that I have seen it before.

“Look at the flies, the flies! There’re so many, and that boy, is that a tail he is using to swipe them away?” She’s starting to get hysterical. “Fuck, and there’s the head of the cow, on the table! It’s Lord of the Flies, and Piggy all over again.” I never saw that movie and don’t think I will now.

“I can’t do this, I’m not buying meat here. This is revolting.” So now I guess it’s up to me and Aretha. She doesn’t seem fussed at all. I must say, I don’t like the old wooden workbenches here. I know there’s lots of blood when you cut up a carcass, and it’ll sink into the wood of the tables. When Jaco goes hunting and cuts up his buck, it’s always on a stainless steel table. I never thought that people would use wood to sell meat from, but I suppose now that I think about it, where would they get a steel one from. Shows you how little I know about how they do things here.

“This meat is very fresh. It is always killed in the morning, that’s why we come early. You can chose beef, or goat, or pig.” Now this I can see, the blood is actually dripping off the table in the front. I am glad Cecile is still holding James, this is no place for little feet to be standing on this ground. Bits of bone fly as the butcher uses his machete to hack a piece for the woman in front of us. I see Aretha brush some bloody goo off James’s cheek that just got flicked off the butcher’s hand. I catch her eye. She’s clever, no fuss, so James thinks she is just being nice to him.

“Good thing Margie didn’t see that,” I say under my breath to her, “or she’d freak. We wouldn’t still be standing in this line for us to buy.” I see her stifle a smile. I wonder what she’s thinking about us, well Margie, I suppose. There’s no air in here, and it is so very hot, and very smelly too. I don’t mind the smell of raw meat, but when it’s mixed with the dirty water smell and the smell coming from the voodoo section that gets me. It’s our turn and Cecile steps forward. She and the butcher talk for a bit, while she explains what we want. Margie see the little fly boy swish the hairy cow’s tail over the meat. The flies have settled over the last minute or two, and now all rise up in a small black cloud. At the same time, the butcher chops with his knife, and some blood flies onto Margie and the back of Michaela’s head.

And then Margie turns on me.

"What the hell are we doing here? This is revolting! Come, we're going." She turns and starts to walk away, and I must say I don't blame her. But who does she think she is, talking to us like that?

"You can leave if you want to, but we're here now, and I want to buy some." This stops her in her tracks, and she turns back to me. "How can you eat that? All the blood and the flies and... and... and the bits." She's worked herself up, and can't get the words out.

"It's fresh meat, this is what it looks like."

"No it doesn't. Fresh meat has quality stamps, health inspectors and trained butchers in hygienic conditions." She's pointing at the butcher, when I see her narrow her eyes to focus. She turns her head slightly, and her voice comes out in a squeak: "The man is missing a finger!" I look where she's pointing, and she's right. His left hand has a stubby index finger. I know she's shocked, but now she's just being downright rude.

"Lots of butchers have lost fingers. You're being very polite to him." I pushed her arm down. "You can go, I'll meet you at the car in a few minutes. Aretha, will you go with her? I would like Cecile to stay with me and help here."

She nodded, and walked back towards the vegetables. Catching my eye as she turned to look back over her shoulder a few steps away, and smiling slightly.

I used the memories of Jaco hunting and preparing the meat to block out the pictures that I was actually seeing now. I filled my nostrils with the memory of a juicy steak, cooking on the fire. I blanked out the market and went into a different zone while I bought my meat. I had to. We all need to do what we must do to get by.

Then I started feeling guilty. I hoped I hadn't upset her too much and that she would relax a bit when she got out of the market. I could see why it stressed her, but this was our new home, and we had to adapt. I hope she'll still offer to take me to the market again. She looks so disgusted now, and mad as a spitting cat. She needs to grow up a bit, I suppose, before she learns that.

"Ai, my *Madame*," Cecile says. "She doesn't like the way we do things here. She worries so very, very much. This meat is very fresh. Every day, at ten o'clock, the abattoir brings the fresh carcass to each butcher here. Her people are not going to get sick if they eat this. We eat this always, and we not getting sick."

On the table too I see all the innards too: the heart, stomach, intestines, liver and the rest of the offal. Jaco loves steak and kidney pie, maybe I should make that for supper tonight. It

was Jaco's mother's recipe and the very best pie recipe you'll ever find. When I pointed out the parts that I wanted, the butcher used his machete to whack into the joint. Man! But that machete cuts through the bones easily. Made me take a step back from the table. Then he had another knife, a smaller one, shaped like a little sickle, which he used to clean up the meat of bits of fat and other unpleasants. He flicked his fingers when he cut off the bits, onto the pile that was growing on the floor, and that must have been what landed on James. A flick gone wrong.

It's a good thing that they are not here now, I think Margie has turned vegetarian today. The butcher was putting the meat onto an old-fashioned scale, balancing it with brass weights on the other end, just like I remember my grandpa's scale. He used to weigh out the seeds that he sold to the farmers with a scale like that. I looked around at all the people in the stall while the meat was being weighed. There was the butcher and his helper and the weigher. The mincing man who is making our "*viande hachee*", there's one of the French words I have learnt here, it means minced beef. There's also the little fly-chaser, then the packer. And a number of other men who are sitting with him, listening to the radio and shooting the breeze, as they say. I guess they enjoy the company just like the men do after the hunt on the farm, when they all prepare the meat together. It's just like home really. In principle.

He wrapped up the different parts in plain newspaper, then he scooped all the packages into a sack and wished me a good day. I laughed at the name on the sack - Nigeria Swedish Cement Factory. I tell you, you just can't make these things up.

We started walking back to the car.

"Thanks Cecile, it was very kind of you to help me with the prices. I'm not any good at that."

"The people here, they expect you to bargain. But I got you a good price. I tell him you a local now, your husband is building the road. These people here, they all know the road project. So the price is not bad he give you."

I laughed. "But still not as good as your price." Now she laughed too. "I hope Margie is not too cross with me for staying there to buy."

She nodded and looked first up at the sky and then down at the ground.

"*Madame*, can I tell you something about *Madame* Margie? But I no want you to think I am being rude. Or maybe being a gossip. I am not a gossip *Madame*." Goodness! That I wasn't expecting, but now I wanted to know what she was talking about.

“Of course Cecile. What is it?” We get on well, Cecile and me. I think it is because we are about the same age, and we have two children about the same age too. These things bond women very quickly you know. Especially women like me in a strange place.

“She has got some tablets that she takes when she wants to calm down very quickly. I think when she is feeling anxious and she gets all worried and panicky like she does sometimes. And she will take them today because I saw her putting them into her bag. They are normally next to her bed. If I watch how fast the bottle goes down, then I can see how Margie is doing. *Monsieur* told me right at the beginning to tell him if *Madame* seems funny, but I no think this is my place. I don’t know what to do.” She seemed to be relieved to let this all out.

“How long has this been going on Cecile?”

“About maybe two months now. *Madame* seems to be getting sadder now, when she is at home by herself. The children are fine, *Madame* looks after them very well. It is just herself that she doesn’t look after so well anymore.” These are big things that she is telling me. I am glad she is sharing, it’s quite a secret to carry around by yourself. And I know how heavy those little secrets get after a while.

“I think you should tell the *Monsieur*. It sounds like he is expecting it. Maybe this has happened before.” I must think hard about how I can help her. “I will also bring the subject up with her sometime. See if she will tell me anything.” Maybe if I start to share some secrets with her, she will share some back. Like what is really going on. I’ll have to ask her, but it’s going to be a tricky conversation.

20. Cecile

I was so happy! My boy had got a job! Praise God and the Ancestors! Two days before, *Monsieur* came home at lunch time like he always did, then when he was finished, he called me to the table. *Madame* left, to take Michaela to bed.

“Sit down, Cecile, I’d like to talk to you.” That scared me. What if he was going to say I couldn’t work here anymore? I was the only one earning, so that always worried me, losing my job. I think he saw I was nervous, because he smiled and said: “Don’t be worried, it’s good news. Well, I hope. Come, sit down with me.”

“What is it, *Monsieur*?” I pulled out one of the heavy chairs, and sat down. I’ve never sat at a table with him before. He was a big man, and sitting here, his legs went a long way underneath the table. I was careful not to let my legs touch his. I’m not one of those women, that uses my legs to get things. Not like Oni. Ai, the things she tells me! He looked like he was used to telling people not to worry. I heard the people say he was a good boss, for one so young. He was only thirty. I knew this because we made a cake for his birthday just a few weeks before.

“Tell me Cecile, is Osiamé working now? I know he does piecemeal jobs, but does he have something permanent yet?”

“No *Monsieur*, he hasn’t found a job, they are very scarce here in Bohicon.”

“Yes, I hear they are. It is also very difficult to find good people to work for us. We need another driver for the company, can Osiamé drive?”

“Oui, *Monsieur*. He can drive. He no have his own car, but he can drive.”

“Do you think Osiamé might want to work as a driver for us? Could he come and see me so that I can talk to him a bit more?”

“I am sure the Osiamé would like that, to work for you. He is very keen for a job, and that will be good work. I will ask him tonight, then he can come and see you tomorrow.”

“If he is interested, then he must let me know quickly, and come here tomorrow after lunch. We need to find someone urgently, and there are other people that I can ask, but I heard that he’s a hard worker. *Madame* told me she was very happy with him, and our floors look very good.”

“He does work very hard. He’ll come tomorrow.” My heart was singing, but I tried to keep my face straight.

“Wonderful Cecile, that will be very nice. Thank you. And now, I must get back to the office.”

The next day, Osiamé met *Monsieur* at the house as we had planned. He put out his hand to shake Osiamé's, and greeted him well. I was watching nervously, but this was a good start. I was sure my boy would impress him. Off they went, up the road, and I could sense things were about to change. There was a pressure in the air, and it wasn't just the rains that we were all waiting for. When the air got too thick and heavy, and the first storms broke, and washed everything clean again. It was something else, I could feel it. It was the start of a new chapter. The time passed slowly until the day was finally over, and I could go home and hear about the day.

“So then I had to drive him to the office. I haven't seen their buildings yet, it is a good building. The walls outside are freshly painted, and they have good offices there.” I nodded, there were times when I had to go to the head office too, to sign work papers.

“Then le *monsieur* gave me other places to drive to, and messages to give to some people, and some things to buy at different places. I was driving with the other driver Sifuel in the car. He seems like an interesting man, and we spoke easily. His brother plays soccer with me, I know him from the club. When I had done everything, then Sifuel dropped me off here. *Monsieur* said he will phone me tomorrow.”

I could tell Osiamé was excited, it had been a long time since I had seen him like that. The hope and the anticipation and at the same time, the doubt and the brave face.

“He will phone. If he said he would, he will.” I had met Sifuel, but I didn't know him very well. Soon I would know everyone at the head office because of my son. And the people there, they would know me. They would meet my boy, and think that I was a good mother. It was easier to live in places when people knew you and thought you were a good person.

Osiamé phoned me the next day to say that *Monsieur* phoned him to give him the job.

“This is exciting news, Maman! I must catch a zemi to the office now, so I can sign the papers.”

“*Félicitations!* I am proud of you! How long is this for?”

“*Monsieur* said I must sign now for one year, then we sign again. The project is four years, so there are four years of earning. This is very good experience, *Maman*. Maybe, when

this road is finished and the others go back to their countries, maybe I can find another job a bit easier next time.”

“Yes you will. This is a good opportunity. This is work with honour.” I would go and tell my cousin later that day, he would be so happy for me. Then he could introduce me to his friends and say, ‘This is Cecile, it is her son who has the job with the road people. He drives the important ones around.’ That sounded very nice to me. Aish, that *Monsieur*, he made me a happy woman that day. I always knew that he would be able to help us. He is a very good man.

“Yes, *Maman*. It is an honourable job. I want to bring honour back to our family” he said quietly.

University of Cape Town

Part 2: The Rainy Season

Seasonal rains wash the red dust from the trees and houses, and everything is cleaned and laid bare again. The rains are frequent and intense, and give life to dormant seeds.

University of Cape Town

21. Margie

"So tell me again, who is actually wanting this project to go ahead?" I asked AJ. He'd come home in a foul mood, and on my Saturday morning off. *That's not allowed.* These outings when he took the kids for a drive along the road were supposed to take a long time.

"The ruling party are all for it. They're the ones that are desperate to get it finished. Even though it's going to take a good few more years."

"And who's causing all the nonsense?"

"Don't know, but we suspect the opposition party is behind it."

"But surely they'll also benefit by the road being built. Well, finished."

"You'd bloody well think so."

"So what's the problem? Why do you think they're behind this theft?"

He closed his eyes and rubbed them with his one hand. The other arm was spread along the top of the couch. His eyes were bloodshot when he opened them again, and he leant his head along his arm. He looked tired and, even worse, weary. I hadn't noticed until now. My head was feeling a bit woozy still. *In that nice way though, the way that takes the edge off the bad parts.* I wasn't expecting him home so early. I shook it briefly to clear it, and to focus on what he was saying. AJ noticed, and frowned a bit as he looked at me. But then fortunately he answered and the conversation continued, and he didn't ask any questions. I didn't think he'd been paying too much attention to me lately, after watching me like a hawk when we first arrived.

"Because if they can successfully screw up the project before next year's elections, they get to prove how incompetent the ruling party are, and get the people's votes. So they're doing everything in their power."

"But where're the security?"

"Good question. Never around at the exact time and place. And we're onto our third company." He picked up James who had wondered in, and sat him on his lap.

"It seems that the cash they get to not be in the right place is more than we are paying them. So frikkin' short sighted. Because we fire them after every event. But that's coming back to bite us, because we've run out of companies to hire in Bohicon and Abomey." He stroked James's hair, and disappeared into his own thoughts. His eyes were focused on something far away.

"And so now?"

"Now, we're bringing in some guys from the UK, Pudney's Protection Services. We've had to do a thorough background on them, all their directors and staff that are moving here, to make sure no-one has any previous links to Benin, the people or politics."

"That's got to cost."

He whistled softly, and James looked around at him.

"Can you whistle like that?" he asked him, a smile softening his face a bit. We watched James huffing and puffing and blowing spit all over.

"Ok, enough. Maybe in a few more years. Sit back like you were." AJ repositioned James, while James snuggled in a bit closer. He adored his dad, and it was rare times that James managed to catch him sitting in one place for such a long time. He was clearly going to take advantage of this. He put his little hand up to touch AJ's cheek, and held it there for a bit. *So tender*. AJ leant in for the love.

"Yip, the costs are rising all the time. The good thing is most of their staff are fluent in French, so hopefully they'll understand the locals better than we can. Every drum of diesel that gets swiped adds up, it's a lot of lost revenue."

"What I don't get is that whole drums go missing at a time. And from what you tell me, not just one at a time either. How the hell do they do it without someone noticing?"

"Oh, I'm quite sure that there are people noticing. But if you can choose between getting paid to not see anything, or to help the foreigners, the same ones that have maybe moved your house, or shifted where you grow your corn, what do you think they choose every time?"

"That's another reason why we hired another driver. The distances we're covering now are getting longer, the teams are spread further apart, and we need more eyes that we can trust to help us cover the ground. Well, that we hope we can trust."

"So that's Osiamé?"

"Yip, I especially chose him, because of Cecile. To be quite honest, I don't know who we can trust at the office anymore. I don't know which of the local staff are for us, and which aren't. But I've got to keep it going with people that I hope have got some sort of attachment to the project to want to see it through."

We sat in silence for a bit, contemplating this. Michaela was feeding at my breast, and James was on his way to falling asleep on AJ's lap. I looked over at AJ, really looked, for a change. Like I hadn't in a long time. There were bags under his eyes, and his skin looked sallow. I didn't know if it was from being tired or from the malaria that we were always

getting. Not the cerebral one, just the one that knocked you down for a while, if you caught it early enough. Otherwise, it did kill you.

I was so vigilant with the kids, panicked every time they squawked. And tested them with our kit, and then retested them, and then got the company nurse to take another test, just to be sure. It frazzled me every time, subjecting them to these tests. And now here was AJ, looking so washed out and I hadn't even noticed. Was he sick, or was he just tired from interrupted sleep from our kids? I squashed a thought bubbling up. *Had he actually noticed me lately? Blow me if I'm going to pay him attention if he doesn't pay me any.* I don't know where that came from. But then, many of my thoughts in those days weren't my own. At least, not that I recognised. I was starting to lose grip on my own head, that much I did recognise. I'd been through it before, I recognised the signs.

They had been out on their Saturday morning drive, something that I had asked for originally. AJ took both kids out for a drive along the road site, and left me in peace. Pure, perfect, wonderful, ringing silence. Nobody needing me. Nobody in my house. No grounds man, no maid, no kids, no husband. Nothing that I had to do. It was my sanity check. Most Saturdays I spent in bed, sleeping and trying to focus on all the reasons why we chose to come here. Reaffirming our choices. Reprogramming my mind.

James loved the drive and seeing the big, bright yellow machinery, and could recognise all the names of the earthworks plant. He corrected me all the time, I never focused long enough to get it right the next time. Michaela fell asleep instantly, rocked along by the bumpy road. AJ and James chatted all the time apparently, about this and that, while AJ did a site inspection along the length of road. That day he was home early, because one of the operators reported more diesel theft. It had been happening a lot lately, and it was AJ's responsibility to stop it.

"We're not winning this battle. Because we don't understand it." He broke me out of my reverie. "I suspect this is just a tip of the iceberg. But we don't know for sure who is behind it. All we know is that we are losing diesel and therefore money constantly. And it's my job to stop it."

"You can't do it my yourself."

"No, but I have to explain it to the board. There's a guy coming out from Denmark to stay here for a few months, Keld Nielson. He'll be heading up the Scandinavian side. He's quite a bit older and more experienced, so I feel a bit like the *kiepie*." And that made him mad, I

could tell. He's old enough to be mature about not taking it personally, but still young enough to see it as an insult to his management skills. A tricky balance, and I didn't know if he was getting it right. When he actually spoke to me about things like that, I remembered just how much responsibility he actually had. While I sat at home and talked baby talk and was surrounded by staff but not friends and was missing everybody at home so very, very much that sometimes it actually hurt me and I couldn't breathe for a while. I forgot. I did.

"Is there anything I can do? Do you need me to help with any admin in the office or anything? Check the books?"

He shook his head. "Can't do that, I'm afraid. Certain key roles had to go to local staff, and for now, we have no proof against anyone to bring in an outsider, and my wife at that. I would have to justify it, and I can't do that professionally at this point.

"The problem is, there are just too many avenues that we need to investigate. And too few of us to do it. And those from home that I know I can trust, have got too much on their plates already, actually doing their jobs and building the road. Hopefully this UK company will help. They've got good credentials and a good track record. And they've worked in third world countries, where the rules seem to be different.

"We don't know how deep the rot goes. In one way, it's a relief this Danish guy is coming. And I'm going to arrange for one of our directors to come too, just for a brief visit to meet him. Decide an integrated strategy to fight this. I need help, and backup here. My reputation's on the line."

"I don't think any of them are judging you for this. No-one will think this is your fault."

"No, it's not my fault. I just can't control it, and that's what bites me."

"Fair enough. Well, just remember I'm here for you. If you need me, that is."

He looked over at me, his green eyes heavy and sad. "Thanks Margs. I do. Need you."

22. Santie

Men, I've always said, are very strange creatures. Just look at today. Dennis said at breakfast this morning that he was going with one of the Danes to buy some ducks. Lars knows where to get them, somewhere in Abomey. Did Jaco and I want to go with?

"Ducks? Why's he buying ducks?" I asked Dennis.

"Yip, ducks," he said again. "There's a festival that happens on the night of the 10th November. I've forgotten the name of it now, it's a Catholic festival Lars tells me. Never heard of it myself, but then I'm not Catholic. Basically, long ago, there was a guy who was forced to become a bishop by his parishioners. He tried to hide in a barn, but the noisy geese gave him away. So when he took up the position, he created a tradition, where everyone has to kill the geese, or ducks if you can't get geese, the night before. It's a big feast in Denmark every year apparently."

"So you're going to get ducklings and grow them for the festival?"

"That's it. Lars has calculated how many we need, plus a few more, for just in case. He plans to throw a big party that night. For all of us."

"I've never eaten duck before."

"Me either. But let's worry about that in November. Right now, are you ready to come?"

Lars, or The Great Dane as they call him, has taken it upon himself to organise this whole thing. He's a brave man. Dennis tells me they get on very well, and as Dennis always likes a new project, so he is going to help build an enclosure for the ducks and feed them. It's nice having other people to organise events, gives us something to look forward to, and to learn about the other cultures here. I'm starting to get used to not having to do everything all the time, like doing all the cooking and organizing parties. I am starting to enjoy this freedom.

So Lars came to fetch us in his car, and it was him and Dennis and Jaco and me. And off we went to go and buy some ducks. I must tell Susanna in my next letter. She'll never believe that her old ma went shopping for ducklings.

We drove out of the complex, past the sign that says 'no entry to outside people' which always makes me laugh. I wonder who wrote that sign and what they were trying to say. We bumped through the big ditch that separated our road from the main road, and I was happy

that it hadn't rained lately because it fills up with water and makes me nervous when we have to drive through it. Lars turned left and headed towards Abomey, instead of right like we normally do to go into Bohicon. If you ask me, Abomey and Bohicon have joined into one town, but Oni insists that they are different towns. So we drove along in the chaos, and next thing we were driving along the edge of the market. And these people, they are not scared of cars. They just walked in front of us, tapping the bonnet to let us know when. Bold as brass, as my neighbour used to say. Even the people on the zemis were having a hard time moving through this crowd.

"Market day," Lars said. "Why it's so busy." That made sense.

"It must be a mission to have to shop every couple of days. Not have fridges or anything to keep food cold. I'd hate it."

"I don't know. It's very social I imagine." Every four days, people come from all over the area to buy and sell.

"Yissee, these people are coming a little too close to the paintwork for my liking." Jaco cursed under his breath, watching them. Nobody must scratch his car, it makes him very angry. We got just past the market when Lars just stopped the car. All these things jumped into my head. What? Here? In the middle of the street? Is he crazy? But I didn't really know him well enough to say anything to him, and it really wasn't my place to tell him where to park.

"Good thing there's no such thing as towing here, and the locals know it belongs to us. It'll still be here when we get back."

We all climbed out of the car, and I was very happy that I wore trainers today. This road was filthy, with vegetables peels rotting in the road, and drying mud now squishy again from the extra people for market day.

"Got to love the rainy season and the mess it makes," Dennis said. Then we started to walk into the market. Lars must have been here before, because he weaved in and out of the alleys lining the market. We dodged some goats all tied up to a fence, I hadn't been this close to goats since I went to my uncle's farm for Christmas that time, and the chickens scare me a little because you never know when you are going to stand on one.

"Watch out here." I gripped Jaco's proffered hand as he helped me to step over a stinking muddy pool. The woman poured her dirty water straight onto the gravel path, right where we were walking.

“Don’t the parents of these kids wonder where they are?” I asked. Since from when we got out of the car, the children followed us, singing that little rhyme of theirs. “*Jovo! Jovo! Bon soir.*”

Finally Lars stops at this compound, and I am breathing quite hard. I haven't done any exercise for a really long time, and this walking is tricky, and fast, what with Lars's long legs. He claps his hands to announce ourselves. And then a man came to greet us, and spoke French to Lars, and led us through to the back of his house.

“Whew! This is bad,” I said to Jaco. The smell of the animals was too awful. There were so many cages and fenced off areas, with all sorts of animals in them.

“Careful where you walk, *my liefling*,” Jaco was still guiding me. I couldn't take it all in. I got a big fright when one of those liguaans poked his tongue out at me.

“Urghh, creepy.” With their tongues flicking in and out, they walk like such mucho men, their chest waving from side and side with their legs and tail weaving behind. We used to shoot those on my uncle's farm, the same one with the goats. There were other lizards also in that area, really big ones. “I wonder what they are doing with all these strange animals?”

“I don't know. Just don't look at any of the people.”

“This does not feel like the Good Lord's work is going on here. Look at those cages over there, pythons and other snakes.” One was very big and completely white. When I stopped to have a look at it, a man that I hadn't seen stepped out from behind the big pile of crates and looked at me in an evil way.

“Come Santie, don't talk like that. Just look forward again and keep up with the others.”

Finally we came to the duck cages where the owner was already packing the little babies into a box for us. We got twenty of them, and they were the cutest fluffiest little things. What a relief after all the other revolting reptiles.

“Come, time to go back to the car.”

“Good, I don't like that strange man looking at me like that.”

Back in the car, the men were talking. “Do you mind if we take them straight to the *hokkie* that they had built? Do you mind getting home a bit later?”

“Well, I am supposed to be cooking supper tonight, so if you don't mind a late supper, that's fine.”

When we got to the bar area, I saw Lars and Dennis had made a nice wire enclosure in the corner of the parking lot, on the other side to where the rubbish piles were. That was nice, at

least the ducks wouldn't have to walk through the rubbish all day like they would have to do if they lived anywhere else in Bohicon.

"They are so cute and fluffy!" I exclaimed, as they released the twenty little pompoms into their new home.

"Grow up fat, guys, grow up fast," Lars instructed. "Come, a drink to celebrate!" And then, look at us, having a drink in the bar to celebrate these ducks that we are going to grow. And then eat apparently, but I won't think about that now. We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, as they say.

"A toast!" Lars called, and said a few words like here's to the start of the ducks and long live the poor bishop and other things like that, and the Danes were laughing very hard at what he was saying, but I didn't really catch the jokes. There were lots of the men in the bar area, and they all celebrated the ducks by copying Lars who banged his glass on the bar counter twice, then threw back the shot in one go. *Pastis* is what they call this firewater. I had never had it before. But all in one go is not the way that a good Afrikaans woman drinks, so I only took a small sip. I felt it burn in my throat and my eyes started to water.

I didn't want to embarrass Jaco so I looked away from all of them so they wouldn't see me struggling to breathe. This stuff was stronger than the *witblitz* we get back home, and they sell those bottles with barbed wire wrapped around them as a warning to you. After that, the men decided to have a beer, and that's when Margie and AJ and the family arrived.

"Ah the Collins family! Come let's show you the ducks!" Dennis, he doesn't drink, so he took little James and AJ out to see the ducks. Now at two and a half, little James was intrigued by all things farmy.

AJ was full of praise when they returned. "Good work men! That's going to be quite a feast. I'm looking forward to the celebration in a few months."

"A toast with AJ," Lars said. So there was more long live the bishop and banging glasses and squigged-up eyes as they swallowed that devil potion. I left the men to it, and started to talk to Margie.

"I'm pleased to see them all so excited about such fluffy things as ducks. Looks like it's good bonding for them."

We fell silent as we watched the men, doing this bonding thing. The bro code as my Stefan used to say. I didn't understand the teenage talk, so I remember him explaining it to me at the time. Ai, there's a lot I remember from when he used to speak to me. Have fun with me. And then Andreas and Aretha arrived at the bar.

“Well, I guess that’s the last excuse gone for rushing home to cook supper. Everyone is here.”

And because Andreas is Danish, he inspected the ducklings too, and their *hokkie*, and discussed how they should be raised with the others. And because he congratulated Lars and Dennis, they needed to toast the ducks again.

“These ducks are the most welcomed guests I’ve ever seen.” I said to Margie.

“This is going to turn into a party tonight. Look at these men, they’re not going home to supper any time soon.”

“You’re right. Everyone’s in a good mood, celebrating the same thing. It brings people together you know.”

The men were drinking more and more, but luckily by this time, they were adding water to their Pastis. It smells like liquorice, and it’s very nice when you got over the burn. I was still drinking that first little glass from the first celebration, even though the men were fast losing count of how many times they blessed the ducks and long lived the bishop.

It’s nice to watch Jaco with the people he works with. I never see him at work, with his colleagues. Nice to see that they all seemed to like him. He was getting funnier and funnier with the jokes he was telling now. Everyone at the bar was laughing louder and louder, and because by this time, supper time came and went and still they carried on.

“You okay there Santie?” It was Dennis.

“Yes, I don’t mind this. We all need our way of letting off a bit of steam sometimes.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him for you.” I caught his eye, and knew what he was talking about.

“It’s nice to see him so popular. I don’t want to be the old ball and chain. It’s just, well, it’s just that I know what always comes afterwards.” I try so hard to be proud of Jaco.

After a long while, when Margie and AJ had left to bath their children, and put them to sleep, I felt a cloud gathering on the horizon, as it were. Jaco was drinking a lot, but I didn’t want to put him in an awkward spot by suggesting that we go home then. Andreas was very kind when he offered to drive us home too, because Lars had toasted one too many duck.

As the night wore on, that cloud got darker and darker, and I knew what was heading my way. Only I knew the signs for Jaco, when something would send him over the edge, and he would go back to the war times, and fight the demons again. The clouds gathered and finally broke and the storm in Jaco hit full force. I could see it in his face. Somebody at the bar said

something taunting, teasing I suppose, but Jaco was in no state to take any teasing. I heard him raise his voice and shout at the other guy.

“Dennis,” I called around. I could see it happening before my very eyes.

“I’m here, what’s is it?”

“Listen to Jaco. Something’s going to happen, I can see it. We’ve got to get him out of here.” But we were too late. I’ve said before how strong Jaco is, but I don’t think I said that he is a black belt judo. As he shouted at that guy, and he was getting redder and redder in the face. I saw him going into himself, no longer with us in Benin, but somewhere else, somewhere far away and long ago. The other guy didn’t even see it coming. He had stood up and shouted some comment back to Jaco, I don’t know what it was, but all hell broke loose.

The next minute, Jaco was across the bar and punching him. Left right left right into his stomach. No-one here can take that, and I saw the man’s eyes open up in surprise then heard his breath be punched out of him. There was an instant of silence, when the scene was frozen. Then everyone moved at once. Shouting and cursing, three others climbed onto Jaco, trying to restrain him. It takes a lot of strong men to do that.

Jaco kept on trying to get at the guy who was now on the floor, doubled over and wheezing. Some others were trying to pull him off the floor, out of Jaco’s path. Jaco, like a man possessed, still managed to lift his arm, and he punched the wall. The plaster smashed and his bones cracked. We all heard it. And my heart splintered right along with it, and my pride. But something in that brought him out of the drunken trance though, probably the pain.

Dennis stood in front of him now, that brave man. He looked at him, and said something softly. I don’t know how he does it, but somehow he gets through to Jaco every time. I saw Jaco shake his head, his eyes still on fire, but he was rubbing his hand. And all the time, Dennis was talking to him, saying the words that Jaco needed to hear, to calm him down.

Next thing, I saw Dennis put his arm around Jaco, turn him away from the crowd, and lead him out of the bar. I am ashamed to say I was mortified. I was still in the bar, and everyone was looking at me now. I looked over at all of them, and quietly left too, following the other two. Dennis would get us home, he’d make a plan for us. I know I should be supporting my husband, but a part of me gets so very embarrassed, and part of me gets so angry because I now have to deal with it. And part of me gets very scared because I never know what’s going to happen next, but a big part of me gets so very sad because it’s not really his fault. He’s not normally like this. When that war ended, nobody thought to get these guys to talk to professionals, to teach them how to deal with the demons. No, they just

sent them home. Just like that, and now the wives must deal with them. And that's not an easy thing to do. It never has been and it never will be.

23. Margie

The official reason for the party a few days later was we were welcoming the Danish boss that had come out to investigate the theft and come up with some kind of strategy.

The actual reason was because he had bought some good black bread and pickled herrings, and vodka which we served icy cold, and promptly all got plastered. I think a lot of the men there were trying hard to forget what had happened a few days ago, with Jaco, and there was some tension in the air. And because they all work together, and there wasn't any room for conflict amongst the expats, everyone was trying really hard to plaster the cracks and to have a good time. A really good time. By drinking again, to forget, and become best friends again. I tried to go back to the house I can't tell you how many times, but AJ caught me every time.

"You have one night off. And this is it."

"But I need to just check on them."

"The night watchman is there, right outside Michaela's window, he knows to come and call us."

And somewhere along the way, I started believing him and got into party mode. My old self. "Come everybody, swim time!" Somebody called out, very deep into the evening.

"Brilliant idea! I'm in!" I shouted. It was still so hot and muggy, even in the early hours of the morning.

AJ appeared with my costume in his hand. "Here, go and put this on first." He knows me too well, this man. One of the Danes thought it would be really funny to push me into the pool. I ran off, making sure that he only caught up to me in the deep end. Somewhere in the tussling, he stood on my toe, keeping it on the paving while the rest of me landed in the water. The pain that shot through my foot, and up my leg, sobered me up before I even reached the surface of the water again. Lights flashed behind my eyes, and I couldn't breathe. I knew I had to get back to the side, and I clung onto the wall, feigning water in my eyes until I got my breath back. I made my way to the shallow end, avoiding the other swimmers who were doing bomb drops and back dives and other stupid things that adults can only do after a couple. I got out to AJ holding a towel out for me. *When had he been to get all these things?* I sat down, and whispered to him that I had to go home, now.

"What's going on?"

"Just take me home, I can't talk right now. I think I've broken my toe."

"We're out of here, got to get this party animal to bed," he said to everyone, and no-one in particular. Fortunately, they all seemed involved in some very loud game, those that were in the pool, and the ones at the bar, well, they were beyond caring at that point.

And that's how, the next day I had my first hospital experience in Bohicon, as the patient.

"Why do these things always seem like such a good idea at the time?" I lamented to AJ when I called him.

"To remind you not to do it again next time." *Smug bastard.*

I had left Cecile with the kids, and AJ sent the company nurse to take me to the hospital so a doctor could take x-rays and see what I had really done to my toe. It was swollen and turning blue. Guy, the nurse, was wonderful, navigating me slowly through the hospital labyrinth.

Good news for me was that the Abomey hospital had a specialised physiotherapy department, run by two Belgians, and subsidised by another aid organization. I met the Belgian physio after a few minutes. He was young, and white! *But where had he been?*

"Do you live here?" I blurted out, very unceremoniously. "I've never seen you before. How can I have not seen you before?" You can't hide a white face in this town.

"Yes, I live in Abomey. With my wife."

"Your wife? There are two of you? Are there any others?"

"And by others, you mean...?"

"You know, well, whites."

"Ah, yes, whites. Well, there is the white Russian lady, who is married to a local. Does she count?"

I didn't like his tone. "Sorry, I don't mean to be rude. I didn't mean it like that. It's just that it's the beginning of July already. And we came here in February. You'd think we would have met, or somebody would have told us about you, or something."

"Yes, I've heard about you. All the people here know about you."

"But why don't I know about you?"

"Do you go out to the bars and talk to the locals ever? We tend to hang out in Abomey. And of course, we're at the hospital all day too, so we don't go out during the day."

"No, ah, we don't really go out much. Or sometimes we do, with the other people here on the contract. So we haven't really asked around much." I wanted to ask him all sorts of questions, like how long had he been here, and where did he live exactly, and why on earth

was he here? Living in this funny town? But the unit was busy, with people who had worse afflictions, and I was starting to feel rather stupid. More so when he asked how I had injured myself. *Well Doc, you see, it was like this...* I kept the explanation short and sweet, then asked him about the work he was doing here.

When I looked around, there were lots of kids there with legs that didn't seem to bend. It was strange, they all seemed to have it. I asked Christof about it, that's his name, the Belgian physio, and he shook his head, and put a bit more pressure on my foot than he needed too. He noticed me wincing, and apologised.

"Sorry," he said. "I get so angry with this, it's so unnecessary. We see it all the time, and these children, they're the ones that have to live with it. Sometimes it comes right, and sometimes it doesn't. But either way, it is sore for a very long time."

"What's the matter with them?"

"It's a very common injury we see. Bogus people claiming to be doctors offer to treat malaria for very cheap, and so many mothers take their children to them for help. It's all they can afford. But they don't inject the children properly, and the legs get stiff and can't bend, so the kids become sort of paralysed for a while. Or forever. We can treat it if we see them soon enough, and keep the muscles working properly. But sometimes, it is just too late, and there is very little we can do."

I looked around, and felt even worse because I was taking up his time when he should have been helping these kids waiting. And because I was living such an insular life. I hadn't met any locals that didn't work for us. It doesn't help that we don't speak fluent French, or that we preferred to keep the kids indoors after sundown to protect them from mosquitoes. It sounded lame now, even to me. The department was neat and clean and smelt the pure white of efficiency and dedication. Nothing in Bohicon was pure white. Nothing. That room had smart, modern, equipment that actually worked. Not like the doctor's office in town that I had been to, or the clinic around the corner from our house. Three small cubicles with swinging doors offered some privacy, a rare commodity. There were schedules on the walls and appointment rosters and educational pictures. So organised. *So European!* The best part was that it was spacious and light. To me, open and airy equaled clean and healthy.

I was sent off to have x-rays in the radiology department. Hobbling on some loaned crutches now, and relying on Nurse Guy 's patience, he led me to the spot where I should sit to wait my turn. He was off to visit some friends. Not that he told me this in so many words, but I'm not that stupid. *Only stupid enough to get myself into this situation in the first place.*

A while later, the radiologist arrived, but Guy had my papers so I was told to wait again. Then Guy returned, but the radiologist was busy so we stayed sitting in the queue. This was about the point I started crunching painkillers and my calming tablets, even though I didn't have any water. The chemical fizz on my tongue was worse than the waiting and the pain. Waiting is an art that I haven't mastered yet. The locals have got it down pat, turning a waste of time into a social event. By then, there were quite a few of us, sitting in a row with our backs to the wall, on a hard wooden hospital bench. Not that I let my back actually touch the wall, of course.

On the bench opposite me, was a tall man and his ten year old daughter, who both had the same most beautiful serene faces and soulful eyes. Arabic noses, all long and regal. Then there were three teenage girls, discussing handbags and purses and student card photos. Loud, and chewing gum, with metallic nail polish. Every single person who passed us greeted us, whether they were medical staff, cleaners, patients or relatives of patients. It astounded me.

At home, we would all be stuck into magazines, or cell phones or newspapers. Some greetings were just a gentle bonjour, others passed a joke or comment – probably about me I expect – and others greeted quickly, but then did a double take when they registered that there was a *jovo* sitting on the bench too. The whole time there was the long distance friendly banter, between the radiologists in their room, and the people waiting, and the admin staff in the little office. Amusing to watch, and it passed the time. I did have to keep reminding myself that there was nothing else that I should be doing. And that I should simply sit and wait.

I gave in eventually, and slouched against the wall. My tablets had all kicked in by then. When I finally, *finally*, got called into the x-ray room, it looked exactly how you could have guessed an African hospital room to look. The floor was the concrete slabs with tiny stone chips, the walls painted that peculiar shade of mint green, fluorescent bulbs above. Sparse furniture: only the x-ray bed, one steel and melamine chair, it would be called vintage at home, and a folding screen which the man ducked behind when he took the x-ray. The x-ray

bed white top was the colour of old white garden furniture – slightly grey with so many scratches that no matter how many times it gets scrubbed, it will never come white again.

There was nothing to step on to get up onto the bed, so I climbed on. Elegance had left the building. Very basic, very rural, but it did the trick I suppose.

The good news, eventually, was that my toe was not broken. Just a bad sprain of the bunion joint. Back with Christof, who rubbed my foot with gel, he asked “Are you sure they x-rayed the correct foot?”

I laughed, then stopped dead. “Oh, you’re being serious?”

He shrugged. “We see all sorts here.” He carried on rubbing for a while, then sent me home. “Please bandage it up. Sorry we are waiting for our next delivery of stock. We should have got it last week, and still nothing. You’ve got bandages at home, I presume.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, we’ve got some.” I felt like I should rush back here and give him my medical supplies. I was well stocked. I knew I wouldn’t ever actually do it, but I had a moment.

“And rest your foot for three weeks. Keep it elevated.”

“Sure,” I smiled at him. “Did I mention I have two small children?”

“But you have staff, yes?”

“Yes, I have staff.”

He shrugged again. “Let them look after the children. They do know how to do it, you know.”

I went home, irritable and grumpy. Far too many things that he had said were hitting home.

24. Santie

She a clever little thing that one, and has got some really clever ideas for one so thin. I'm talking about Aretha of course. You mustn't underestimate her just because she comes from Tanzania. Oh no, sir-ree. But let me start at the beginning of this story.

We were sitting and crocheting the other day, I've taught her the basic stitches and now she is already onto making some coasters for our table in the lounge. Now, when we watch our programmes together and put our tea on the table, then the hot mugs won't leave any marks. So we were sitting there, and talking about going to the bar for a drink for one of the engineer's birthdays.

"I always get a little nervous about going back to the bar."

"Nervous? Why nervous? You know everyone there."

"Well, exactly. Because of Jaco, and um, the, uh, problems we've had there. But only sometimes," I added.

"Santie," she said, "if it's such a problem, why don't you suggest something that he could do that would keep him busy, not in the bar and not drinking." Just like that, she said it. "Dennis has his ducks. He's there every night, feeding them, and checking on them, fussing that no-one has stolen them. That they're getting nice and fat."

"He's like a mother hen himself."

"Jaco needs something like that. What does he like doing?" We sat quietly for a little while so that this idea could stew a bit.

"Whatever we think of, we just have to plant the seed in his head, and then let him think of the idea. Then it would be his good plan and he would go for it. It wouldn't be, coming from his wife and he'll think I'm nagging. Worse than a dripping tap, according to the Bible."

"Really? It says that?"

"It does. I'll find it and show you one day."

I thought of all the things that Jaco used to do at home. And one of the things that he loved to do was going hunting on my uncle's farm to shoot kudu. And to make biltong. That there is delicious food, when the fillet is dried properly, like Jaco makes it. All salty, and a bit rare on the inside. We haven't had it for ages, living here. That's when it hit me.

"Meat, he likes working with meat. Why can't Jaco start a butchery here for all of us?"

“Margie would thank you. That’s for sure. I don’t think she’s gone back to the meat market yet. I think Cecile is still doing all her meat shopping. What you thinking of?”

“I don't know quite how he would do it, he's always the clever one for making the plans, thinking about how things would work. But the cook in the mess would know where to buy the carcass from the abattoir. And there must be somewhere here to make a cold room. They are engineers after all.”

“Engineers yes, but can they make a cold room in the tropics?”

“Must be able to. How hard can it be?” We laughed at that. Famous last words.

“They can make the arrangements, and if they need equipment, then they can send it up when the next container arrives. Like Margie did when she ordered all those nappies for the children. Surely they could do that?”

“Sounds like a great idea. We’ll plant the seed, like you say.”

So that night at supper, I started a conversation.

“You know men, we’ve got to help Margie out. She’s having a difficult time.” They were all looking at me, Aretha and Andrea, and Dennis and Jaco because I don't normally start conversations like this.

“I told you about shopping for the meat. And now with her sore foot. I know we all find it a bit tricky sometimes, but she doesn't seem to cope like us. Maybe it’s just because she’s young. I don’t know.”

“Aretha’s young too.”

“You’re right there. Must be something else.” What I didn't say is that we seated at that table cope so much better than Margie because of where we come from. Aretha had such a very hard start to her life that this is now very comfortable for her, living here with Andreas. For me and Jaco, this is simply a means to an end, and quite a quick way of doing it.

And Dennis is making quite a bit of money so that he can retire soon and go back to his wife and family and watch his grand babies grow up. But like I said, I didn't say these things at the table that night.

“One of the things that I can do very easily for Margie is to buy meat for her. She’s silly with how squeamish she is. I don’t mind it, what with my uncle having the farm, and us going hunting and having to process the animal into steak and chops and stew and other things like that. She really doesn't like going into the market to buy meat with the children,

and still sends Cecile out. Not that I can really blame her with the blood dripping and the bits of bone flying around like that.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if we didn't actually have to go into the market to buy the meat, if we could just make our own meat. Like we always did at home," I said and looked over at Jaco.

"You prepare the meat so well when we go hunting, and you seem to have a good time. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could do that here?"

"You know what I miss here?" Dennis asked to no-one in particular. "Biltong! You make biltong when you go hunting?"

"Biltong's the easiest part!" Jaco responded. "You just spice the meat, and hang it up to dry. We put it in front of the aircon on the farm."

"And *boerewors*, that's what I miss also."

"You know, my brother back home, he was the *boerewors* champion for the province back in 2001. I've got his recipe, it's really good."

"What's that?" Piped in Andreas.

"Boerewors? It's a spicy sausage. Like our forefathers used to make it, very traditional. It literally means farmer's sausage. Damn good stuff it is, too."

"Yissee Jaco, why you only telling us this now! When we going to make some biltong, and some wors? Then we can show these Danes how to really *braai*." I could have kissed Dennis, he was doing this better than I ever could have. Not that I really would have kissed him, what with both of us being married and all, but you know what I mean. I got a little flushed thinking along those lines.

"You do make very delicious sausage, *my skat*. But where would you do it? I don't mind if you want to work in this kitchen, but it might be a bit small."

"We need a place. Somewhere close by. Maybe take over Pascal's garage. Do it there."

"Won't Pascal have something to say about that?"

"Nah, he's got two at that house. One he doesn't even use."

"We'll have to get someone to scrub that place. Needs to be spotless. You going to help me though Dennis? We'll rope some of the other guys in too, more fun that way."

"When you thinking of doing it?" Dennis was on a roll here. And I hadn't even prepped him.

"We'll do it nights, and weekends. Time is what we have here, and plenty of it. Anyway, it's right near the pool, and you go there most nights. And the others are there too, they can come and talk to us, while we work."

And just like that, Jaco had a project, and Margie was going to get meat at the house two doors up the road, and we were all going to get biltong and boerewors and a taste of home. Of course, the men were chuffed with this idea they came up with, and the plans went into top gear. Putting an aircon into the garage, insulating the walls with polystyrene, stainless steel tables, meat hooks, spices and meat saws and mincers coming up with the next container. The whole bang shoot. They didn't think it would take much to convince AJ, especially if they sold it as wanting to help out Margie and the children. Of course, AJ would probably see through that flimsy excuse but they counted on him going along with it. I hoped he would, especially seeing how excited Jaco was getting now, without any alcohol. These guys could make it happen. I looked across at Aretha, and winked at her. And she had to look down at her food to hide her smile. I tell you again, she's a clever one, that Aretha.

University of Cape Town

25. Margie

I needed to get my toe healed as soon as possible, I was like a bear with a sore head. Although somewhere deep inside, I was enjoying the attention. Not that I would ever say that aloud, of course. No, to the outside world, I needed to be mobile again, and quickly. What I really needed was painkillers that had not already passed their expiry date. But, after the pointed discussion with the physio, I was all for taking on experiencing local culture and I turned to Cecile.

“Tell me Cecile, who’s going to fix me? Apart from the doctors at the hospital. Isn’t there somebody here that can help?”

“The ones here that can heal are the Ahousa.”

“The who?”

“These people are from Niger. They can heal, they are amazing healers. I will find one and ask them to come.”

When she spoke to the bread lady about it, she heard there was an Ahousa lady right here in Bohicon, not far from where I live; the bread lady would find out exactly where, then tell Cecile how to contact her. I asked Nickson about these people, and he knew exactly what I was talking about, and said yes, they were great healers. So with the recommendation from my maid, grounds man and the bread lady, I agreed to give her a try. *Social networking at its best.*

Next morning, just after eight, I heard the "ku-koo" of someone that had been let into our front gate, and I thought it was the bread lady. I let Cecile deal with her, and buy our daily French sticks. But Cecile came hurrying down the passage.

“Quick, get dressed, she is here.”

“Who’s here, Cecile?”

“The healer, the Ahousa, she’s come to help you.”

“Today? Already? Did we make an appointment?” She stopped and looked me then.

“She has come to *help you*,” she stressed. “She does not need to make an appointment. You need to hurry up. Quick! She is waiting.”

Cecile had showed her to an armchair in our lounge, and pulled up the footstool for me to sit on. At her feet. *Well that's new.* She was Muslim and dignified and wore a skirt of bright local cloth. Matching fabric was wrapped around her head, with another lacy scarf covering that. What struck me though was her white t-shirt with Nike splashed across the front. Here she was, this esteemed healer, from an enigmatic people who wander the Sahara desert, wearing Nike. Orange plastic slip slops, and a solid gold tooth. A woman dressed in contradictions.

She spoke no French, so we communicated via Cecile speaking Fon. She took my foot in her hand, and Cecile explained the area that was sore. She put her thumb on my toe joint and pushed and pain seared through my foot. I screamed and James came running through.

"It's okay boy, I just got a fright." I was talking through my gritted teeth. Cecile called Nickson to get him to take James. *Madame*, she just looked at me, and I forced myself to calm down. I let out the breath I had been holding. Then she spoke to Cecile about what treatment was needed and what she planned to do. I wasn't asked an opinion, although I wanted to pull my foot out of her hand, and lock myself in my room and never have her touch me again.

"*Madame*, she needs some *pomade*." I brought back my Deep Heat for sprains and bruising.

"She say this is no good, she want Vaseline." They carried on talking while I hobbled off to fetch Michaela's. When I came back and sat down, she held my foot again.

"Today would hurt a little, but tomorrow would be better," Cecile translated "so today I must just resist the pain." *Hmmm, not sounding good.* She started off by closing her eyes and muttering something under her breath.

"She is praying," Cecile uttered to me.

Then *Madame* just dived straight in, massaging right on the sore joint, and pushing inwards on the side of the bunion joint, wiggling my toe and then pulling it so that it popped. Pain clouded my vision, and I could hardly breathe. The acid green tendril of fear, swirling around me, twisting and turning between my toes. I started sweating - the drips forming between my breasts and running down my stomach. Cecile was sitting behind me, holding me and telling me to resist, to resist, to resist. Then *Madame* took some Vaseline, spat on her fingers a little, and all thoughts of grossness and diseases disappeared as she started her second onslaught. Same massaging again, more toe pressing and pulling. Then she touched her fingers to the floor, with more praying. I was gripping my own leg, trying not to pull it away from her.

More Vaseline and as she repeatedly slapped my toe, I had to breathe through the dizziness. There was no way I was going to pass out. *Although it might have been easier.* Resist, resist, resist. Touching the floor again, more prayers. Then more massaging and more probing and pushing and popping. I reached over to clutch Cecile, leaning against her while she cradled me. Just when I was about to break and beg her to stop the pain, she did. I opened my eyes a crack, realised where I was, and sat up quickly. Embarrassed that I had been such a baby, so dependent on Cecile. And that was it. The whole thing lasted only about five minutes, but I was exhausted. I thanked her as best I could, and asked Cecile to see her out. I couldn't walk from the throbbing, my body both hot and cold, like a fever.

When Cecile came back into the lounge, I was lying on the couch, my eyes closed, and my foot up on a cushion.

"Cecile, how many days is this going to take?"

"I asked her that and she say it is not for her to say, Allah is telling her how to work, so we must just wait and see, maybe three days, maybe one week.

"But don't worry, I fix the price before." *Good woman.*

"I don't know if I can do this. The pain, it's so sore! This can't be healthy, what she is doing."

"These people know what they are doing. They are good healers, you must believe."

"I'll see how it goes tomorrow, but then maybe I'm going to cancel her. What if she messes up my toe forever, with all this nonsense?"

"It's not nonsense *Madame*. You must believe! Before she comes again tomorrow, I must find some special leaves that she told me about. I'll go to the market, she told me where. Then tomorrow, I will get some fire to make them hot."

"Leaves? Fire? What the hell?"

"Don't worry, I will find fire, we just need a small one."

"Look, fire, here, leaves" I stumbled over my words. "Never mind, I'll talk to you about it later. I can't think straight now."

"These people, everyone knows them as good medicine people. We only did what you asked *Madame*."

"I know. Don't remind me. And Cecile?" She turned back to me. "Thank you for today. For helping me. For every day actually. I don't think I could do any of this without you."

She looked at me for a minute, her eyes hard. Many thoughts unspoken, I could read them. But then, her face softened, and she smiled a gentle smile.

Day two and I was dreading it. By now, probably the whole neighbourhood knew what a wimp I am. The thought of fire and leaves and my poor foot had been tormenting me. My toe had throbbed and swelled up a lot yesterday after she left. I could barely walk the pain was so intense. I got it in the neck from AJ for doing this, “If these people are such good healers, why doesn't the rest of the world know about them?”

And then I found myself defending my decision to try local healers, so I knew I couldn't back out. Some of the things the physio had said had really hit home. In for a penny, in for a pound.

But earlier this morning, when I woke up, it was miraculous; my toe was so much better. I looked down at it, and wiggled it cautiously. It moved. Not only was it back to its normal size for the first time, but actually not nearly as sore. So maybe there was some truth in this lady's healing ability.

She arrived as planned, again in the Nike t-shirt, and local cloth. For the first time, I noticed her hands. They are the hands of a wise old lady, surprisingly slim and elegant for instruments of torture. I assumed the position at her feet, and as she took my foot in her hand, she gently massaged it, talking to Cecile.

“She said that we will use the leaves tomorrow. Not today.” *Damn it, I'm not good at waiting.* Then she unwrapped a little pouch from the edge of her wrap skirt, and took out what looked like a little stone. They all do this, tie their money and valuables in a knot in one corner of the skirt waistband. It was something I vowed to try on my beach sarongs.

“That they call a grisgris. It is to keep special things, maybe a piece from the Quran, maybe her special prayer.”

It's what I thought was the stone. The dirty brown paper had thread wrapped around it. She held this to her lips, and prayed on it. We watched her in respectful silence. And then, whack! She hit my foot with it. Again and again and again. She just carried on slapping my foot with this thing, which now felt like a stone. *Excruciating!* I started sweating, just like that, and gripped my leg again, to force myself not to pull it away. All pretences of composure gone. Then she set about massaging my foot again, the same as yesterday, with all the toe popping and pulling. And again, just as suddenly, she stopped, and that was the end.

“I certainly hope she knows what she is doing,” I muttered, as I collapsed on the couch. James came in as *Madame* left, and put his little hand on me, his eyes full of worry.

“Don’t worry my boy, it’s sore now. But she’s helping me. She’s going to make Mommy better.” I needed to convince myself as much as him. But part of me knew that the pain was a deeply gratifying physical manifestation of the pain inside me. Maybe I had brought this all on myself, so that somebody would see me and notice what was going on. Without me having to tell them, and admit that I am weak, and can’t handle all this. The living here, being with my kids all day, but being absent, like I was watching them from outside and not actually experiencing it. That I wasn’t happy to be at home with these wonderful children all day, and I didn’t like the living the exciting adventure that other people only dreamed about. I couldn’t tell that to anyone, what kind of person would they think I was? I couldn’t tell anyone that the sadness and melancholy was growing worse.

Fortunately I had found a local pharmacist to supply me with the same tablets that my friend had given me. I had long since run out of hers. They helped a lot, dulling the edges. Another failure of mine. Another thing to live with in silence, behind my smile.

Day three came, the dreaded fire day.

“Cecile, if she can hurt me so much with folded paper, what the hell is she going to do with fire?” The truth was, I didn’t know how to stop it. This train, speeding down the slippery track. But once again, it’s so much better than yesterday. Such a bizarre practice - the treatments were excruciating, my foot swelled up immediately and throbbed for hours, and yet the next day, the improvements were clearly noticeable. I couldn’t explain it, and didn’t even try in my emails to friends back home. It was just so foreign.

When *Madame* arrived, Cecile was sent off to get the fire. Instructed to go to the compound across the road and to ask for a few coals from the cooking fires. She arrived back, the burning coals simmering in an old tuna tin, which she set it down on the floor. My first thought was it’s a good thing our floors are tiled and not flammable. My second thought was more colourful - *that’s a hot coal, and my foot’s going to be feeling it.*

Madame spread one of the large leaves over the coals in the tin, and waited a while for it to heat up. I took a deep breath of delicate pink relief.

“She’s not going to put the actual coal onto my toe.” I smiled at Cecile. Chatty now, the tension draining out of me. “What leaf is it, Cecile?”

“I will ask.” The discussion carried on for a while, while the leaf was heating.

“I don’t know the name of the bush. I will try and find out. There are some here, in Bohicon.”

I had studied botany at university, and these things fascinated me. It was a big, fleshy leaf, I had imagined some type of lily pad, or water plant, but I was obviously wrong. From some kind of bush, she had said. While this was going on, *Madame* sat back in the chair and surveyed my house. I wonder what she saw when she looked at it. After a while, the leaf was hot enough, and to give her credit, she did test it on her arm first. As soon as she held it against my bunion joint, a zing vibrated through my foot. It was so weird, it only happened that first time. I relaxed into the warmth and soothing feeling, she was being so gentle with me. She kept heating it up on the coals so she could get all the juice out. She squeezed the juice, then massaged that in, tenderly now. Over and over again, and I relaxed under the caring pressure of her healing hands. Maybe she wasn't so bad after all.

"The *Madame* says you had a very, very bad sprain," Cecile translated a few days later. "She says it's a good thing that she is working on it, because otherwise it would take a very long time to heal." *There I have it.*

In my complacency, I leaned back into my chair, holding Michaela on my lap. Then I made a big mistake.

"Cecile, please tell her that my foot is so much better, but I still can't bend my big toe very far." Hardly at all. *Madame* got what I meant, muttered a bit, and then put some leaf juice on my joint, the one that should bend, and jumped right in. She bent it so far forward I thought she was going to dislocate it and we'd have to start all over again. I yelped and tried to pull my foot away, shouting for Cecile to take Michaela. But *Madame* had me by the big toe. When I pulled back, I hurt myself more. I sat there, the pain back to day one. After an eternity of toe bending and praying and massaging and touching the floor, she stopped and said something, then laughed a bit. I looked to Cecile.

"She's asking if you have any pain." *No shit, Sherlock.* I closed my eyes and nodded, panting. I kept thinking it's only a toe, I've survived childbirth, three times. I should be able to do anything. I took a deep breath, nodded again, and reached out to Cecile. She came to stand behind me, and simply took my hand, my child on her hip. Cecile, my strength, my protector, my translator, my caretaker, my friend. How could I have known that this little lady would become the one that I relied on the most? I squeezed her hand gently. My life is on a strange road.

26. Cecile

It is a sad thing when the people in your own family can't be happy when you are blessed with good fortune. It was like this with my cousin. He is such a good man and was so excited for me when I first told him about Osiamé and his new job. Now, he said that Osiamé's work was not good, he'd heard about bad things that were happening on that road. I didn't know why he was thinking that now, a few weeks after Osiamé had been driving for the road company.

Osiamé's job was great, and even better, he was making plenty of money. Enough to buy me a new table for the kitchen. The leg had broken on the other one, and the bottom of it kept falling out if someone bumped it. Which I did the other day, and then the table tipped over, all the ground nuts that I had been shelling spilt and rolled all over the floor. So my Osiamé, he bought me a new table as a present. He knew that other one made me so cross, and he said he wanted me to be happy. Ai, that made me very happy, my boy and the new table.

My cousin started this talk not long after Osiamé started driving for the company. I told him that day straight away, because I know he worries about me. And he keeps one eye on my children too ever since my husband died. He never believed the badness at all, he carried on believing that we were a good family. He was happy for me then, when I first told him.

I'd seen my cousin many times since then, and every time, he asked about Osiamé and what he was doing at work. So I told him. I was proud of my son. I told him how he drove the important people from South Africa and Denmark around up and down the road site so that they could see how the building was coming. He knew that road now like the lines on his own hand. He also drove people to the airport in Cotonou, and that is two hours away. They trusted him that much.

Osiamé told me how he knows everyone working on the road, and all the others involved in some way. Like the ones working in customs in Cotonou when the big machines come from the sea, and the ones that are working for the Danish group that are giving the money to the government to build the road. I told my cousin how he even met some of the politicians, but not the ones in the government. The ones working for the other party, he hasn't met the ones in power yet. But that would come, I was sure of it. That would come. And I told my

cousin that sometimes when work was finished, these politicians phone him to drive them around too. He was one of the valuable ones now, my son. So he drove all these important people along the road. He was happy that he's learnt so much. When they asked him questions, he knew all the answers and could tell them all sorts of things about the project. He is clever, that one. I've always known that.

But then, every time my cousin saw me and asked about Osiamé, he got a funny expression, and he shook his head.

"What is the meaning of this?" I asked him. "This look, and your excitement at my good fortune is gone!"

"I must talk to that boy," he replied. "Why do these men want to be driven along the road after hours and not while they are all working?"

"It's obvious, they are busy people, important men these ones. During the day, they have their own jobs in politics, they don't have time to come all the way to Bohicon. That's why they come later, past office hours." But he still shook his head, and said that it didn't sound right.

"Ai, don't worry my cousin, these people are paying him, as well as the company. It's not like they are using him and doing it for free. Don't worry that he's working too hard and not getting paid for it."

"That's it, you see. I'm not worried about Osiamé working too hard. I'm worried about what he is getting paid for, who he's working for."

"I know who Osiamé is working for. But ask him if you want. You're not going to be happy hearing it from me. Ask him then, you know where to find him." He said nothing at that. Ha! That put him in his place. I didn't know what had come over him, all this doubt. He just started shaking his head again.

Osiamé didn't need to tell me every day about what he did. That's not necessary. It is not for a man to have to tell his mother every little thing about his day. He'd grown up, an adult now. I could see how he'd changed over the last few weeks, matured. He stood tall now, and proud.

That little boy who used to be teased has gone for good. That little boy who always had to learn how to do things with his left hand, nobody teased him anymore. He was growing up to be the man that I always hoped he would be. Even his sister noticed the change that was happening. We saw the people that came to our house in their fancy cars. They came to our little house so that they could meet Osiamé like men do. They were wearing clothes of the

best *tissu*, and their shoes were leather and shiny. They discussed issues late into the night, we could hear the murmur of voices through the door. I heard Osiamé taking part in the conversation, and I was proud. And these people, they recognised the kind of person that Osiamé is, and rewarded him for that, for the good work that he was doing.

Yesterday he told me that they are grateful to him, and so they gave him money to buy a new suite for the lounge. They said that he must make sure that his mother is comfortable, because it's a good mother who can raise a son like him. I was embarrassed a bit by this, because I knew this is true, but I am not one to brag. I simply asked him to thank them for their kind words. I said he could choose the new suite to make sure that when these people come to visit, they can sit in comfortable chairs like they are used to. I have realised that maybe Osiamé bought the new kitchen table because he was embarrassed when these men saw the broken leg. Good for him for wanting to improve himself and learn from these men who are successful in politics. They are good role models for my boy. Like I thought my cousin used to be, but I wasn't so sure anymore. I wasn't going to tell him all the good fortune that Osiamé was making happen in our family. I couldn't stand the look in his eyes anymore, it looked like disappointment. It made me too cross. I was disappointed in him for not being happy for our change in luck. It was about time for some good fortune, it has been away a long time, and we were grateful to Osiamé, for bringing it back to us.

27. Cecile

Most days Clairdor and other children came to play. The teachers were still on strike. So it's good Clairdor came, he learnt a lot from the toys *Madame* et *Monsieur* brought with them from South Africa. Ezekiel didn't come anymore. After the first few times, we didn't want him back. He fought with James and made him cry all the time.

Clairdor came then with two brothers, Aziz and Ismail. Aziz was four, and Ismail the same as Clairdor, then six years. James had learnt to share with them nicely, and they spent many hours riding on bicycles and playing with all the balls. *Monsieur* got people from work to come and make a sandpit for the children, and then we put water in big buckets where they can sit and splash and pour water in cups. James never liked to wear clothes, and only wore short pants. He loved getting all wet and playing in the water. I didn't want to ruin the other children's clothes, so we took off their clothes too.

"Remember the sun block please, Cecile." I heard it then every day, even when she wasn't there. It's forever in my memory, she was so worried about everything when she first arrived. Another rule of hers was that he had to wear shoes when he went out the gates. Didn't have to inside, but *Madame* insisted that there was too much dirtiness in the streets. Boy, did we all fight trying to get those trainers onto him. It got much better when we got him slippers like all of us wear.

James was very good at what he called puzzles. We don't know puzzles here. His ones had a picture of a boat or an aeroplane and were cut into four pieces. He would break the picture up into the pieces then see how quickly he could join them up again to make the picture whole. Clairdor and the others couldn't do this either until James showed them.

Then they wanted to tease Nickson, so we called him to ask him to make the picture. He couldn't do it, and the children laughed a lot. Even more when James showed him how.

"Aish, this is a very difficult."

"These children, they've been doing this all day."

"Come, let's ask Jeffoir. I don't think this is for people who live here."

"Jeffoir will be able, he's very clever. He sorts out all the accounts in the bar for everyone."

“Let’s see. Jeffoir! Come here!” Nickson called him over and explained what he had to do. But he couldn’t do it either. There were big discussions between Jeffoir and Nickson, then they decided to take it outside to the others on the pavement. And so, that is how the ritual began. Later, when I was looking for James after lunch, I would look outside the gates, and there where we sit in the shade of the big mango tree, I would find him with Nickson and the other men, showing them how to do this puzzle with four pieces. It got better, with the people outside, they didn’t pull his hair or pinch his skin after a time. He became one of us.

And because he sat outside with us, he had lots of mothers and fathers - everyone looked after the little *Jovo-vie*. When he went outside with Nickson and no shoes, the people outside laughed and asked Nickson why he forgot the shoes again. Then James had to run back inside to get his orange slippers. We taught him to shake hands like us, and say “*Bonjour*” when someone greeted him. He liked our food too, I took James and Michaela to buy something every day. The deep-fried sweet potato was Michaela’s favourite, but James enjoyed fufu the best. He liked to unwrap the big leaf wrapped around the cooked yam, then we showed him how to make a small ball and dip it into the tomato sauce that they make too. *Madame* didn’t like it, but she became okay with the children eating our food, and coming down the road with me to the woman who cooked and sold the yam. Then we would come back and sit under that tree until it was finished.

Yesterday, Osiamé drove past as we were sitting there. He saw us and stopped.

“Bonjour!” He greeted us all, and came and joined us sitting on the pavement.

“How are you, my son?”

“Fine *Maman*, fine. Hello James. You having some nice food?” James looked up at him, and nodded his head.

“Be polite James, Say ‘*bonjour*’ to Osiamé.”

“*Bonjour* ‘Siame.’”

Osiamé laughed. “You like that tomato sauce?” James nodded again.

“Here, try some of mine.” Osiamé had also just bought fufu, and held out his plastic cup of sauce to James. “Come on, this is the good sauce.”

“What are you giving him?” I asked as James dipped his ball of yam mash into Osiamé’s sauce.

“Watch, *Maman*.” And I did, as tears came into James’s eyes and he started to cry.

“What is it Osiamé?” I was getting worried now, James was trying to scrape his tongue with his fingers, but he was making it worse. I jumped up and ran into the house to get some milk for him. *Madame* was fortunately not in the lounge, she must have been with Michaela. I ran outside again, cursing Osiamé under my breath.

“Here, drink this, it will make it better.” I had him on my lap now, while he gulped down the milk. He was crying and hiccupping.

“Why did you do that?” I hissed at Osiamé. “Why do you want to hurt James, he’s done nothing to you. This family is what keeps us going.”

“Ag, they’re all the same. He’ll grow up to be just like the rest of them.”

“Like who? What are you talking about?”

“Like that bastard Keld Nielson.”

“What’s happened with him?” I turned to Osiamé, worried, but still cross. Whatever happened at work with him had nothing to do with James. James was my job, Keld was his. “Just wait, before you tell me. James, do you want some sugar?” He nodded through the tears, not looking at Osiamé at all. I asked Nickson to take him across to Agbenyaga, to buy a sugar cube. I didn’t want Nickson to hear this, he’s a blabbermouth that one.

I turned back to Osiamé. “I can’t believe you were so mean. I never raised you like that.”

“There are lots of ways you never raised me. And he needs to know that you can’t trust everyone in life.”

“He’s only three!”

“It’s never too young to learn. Look how old I was when I had to learn. *Merde!* The hard way.”

“Osiamé, what’s happened? Why are you talking like this? Thinking like this? What’s going on?”

“*Maman*, that man Nielson is so rude. Normally I just try to ignore it, but today, it was especially bad, and I’ve been driving him for many hours today. I’ve had enough. Enough of all of them.”

“Who’s them?”

“These people that come into our country, and think they are doing such good, like they’re some sort of heroes.” I watched the muscles in his strong jaw twitching. “He complains how I drive every time. But I am a good driver, everyone compliments me. It’s just him. He was moaning all the way from Cotonou. Slow down! Speed up! Why you swerving so hard? Where did you get your license? Who did you have to pay? And on and on. He really got on my nerves.”

“Be careful my son, they pay your salary.”

“I don’t need a salary from that man. He can keep his measly amount.”

“You waited a long time for this job, and now you have it. You do well at it. Please. I’ll not go through that again, with my men bringing me shame. Embarrassing me.” He said nothing, just looked down at the ground, and then far away, down the road to where we could hear the cows in the distance.

“I will *Maman*, I will. You know I will.”

“I thought you would, yes. But then you go and give James chilli to eat. Now what must I think?”

“Aish, *Maman*, that was nothing. I’ll say sorry. Buy him another sugar.”

“That’s more like it.”

“I must go now. I’ve got a busy afternoon, and more visitors tonight.”

“Who you driving this afternoon? And are people coming to our house tonight.”

“Relax, you don’t need to do anything. We might go out for our meeting. And this afternoon is just local, and not Nielson. I can handle it. I’ll see you later.” I watched him join Nickson talking to the girls who were buying some water over the road. He ruffled James’s hair, who didn’t seem so happy at that, then I saw him give James some coins while he said something, so I hoped he’d apologised to James. Things were changing here. The air was different - everyone felt it. It made people do strange things.

28. Margie

"You know, it hit me yesterday, just what gets to me about this town that's our new home. It's ugly. And dirty. And constantly noisy with so many people around all the time. It's like living in the poor townships back home, and I don't have to live there at home, why did we choose to do it here?"

"Well that's the thing, isn't it?"

"What?"

"You get to choose."

"I do. I know I'm privileged. But does that make it wrong to want paved roads, and pretty clean houses, and proper gardens, with grass? And now, with all this rain every afternoon and the roads getting washed away all the time, we're more housebound. We have to either stay home when the road is washed away, or find another route to just manage to keep the car on the road. The novelty has worn thin. The adventure is gone. I'm tired of dirty kids squashing their faces against our car windows to see the kids, leaving snot streaks on the glass. It really gets to me. I know they're curious, but I find it downright rude. And I know I shouldn't, I know they're only kids."

We were having a coffee at Chez Monique. I still got a kick from the DIY coffee in the boma. Santie was kindly lending an ear. She nodded along as I spoke.

"I miss the things that we put into storage for the next four years while we're here. I've tried to garden here, but miss my garden tools and had to use latex surgical gloves." She smiled at this, while her head still nodded.

"I'm missing my recipe books with my favourite recipes, and my photo albums and all our special things. We've got everything we need here, but there's no history to it. I'm starting to realise how that's getting more and more important to me."

Here she nodded again, and looked down into her lap.

"And the worst part is, with all our other moves, AJ and I have grown closer together. This time, that's not happening. He's busy and never at home and I'm just sad or angry all the time. During our other moves, we generally swapped roles all the time with one of us being strong when the other one needs strength, and we really have a strong relationship because of it. Thank heavens we started off well, because I think I am blowing it here."

"Moving to Benin, AJ has to be the strong one now, all the time. I don't know if I want to live here anymore. He said he felt the same when he first arrived, while I was still in South Africa, but had time by himself to work out what he wanted. So that's one good thing I suppose, that he's has been through what I'm going through now. But me, I don't seem to be coming out the other side. I'd be lying if I said it was all was rosy and wonderful." I wiped away a tear that I didn't know had formed, and drank from my coffee. The bitterness in me smelt dark brown. Santie sat there still, just nodding, and letting me vent.

"After Cecile leaves in the afternoon, I find myself phoning him to find out what time he's supposed to be home. And if he's not home by then, I get paranoid that something has happened to him. I pace up and down my veranda, and send James up the mango tree to look for his car coming down the road. And I phone him again, to see where he is. I've become completely neurotic. I don't know when it started, I never used to be like this. And please Santie, don't say anything to AJ.. When he does arrive, I act all nonchalant, like I was just playing with the kids outside. I've started making Cecile stay later and later, so I don't have to be by myself, and make any decisions. I can't seem to decide anything anymore, I get so panicked that it's not going to be the right one and something bad is going to happen." My hand shook as I lowered my cup, and she noticed.

"Why is your arm shaking?"

I shook out my arm, flexing and closing my hand.

"I'm on some medication. Maybe it's a side effect. I'll read the package later."

"What's the medication for? You want to tell me?"

"They help me cope a bit. Take the edge off."

"A lot of new moms suffer from depression apparently, I used to read about it in my magazines. Is that what you're going through?"

"Post-natal depression? No. No that's not me. I'm not that weak. Maybe some baby blues, but not depression. And the baby blues are just because there're no other young mothers here, with little babies."

"Well, you let me know if you ever want to talk about it. But I just want to say one thing, if you need to get help, you must get it. I don't know where here, but you've got to find somewhere. You can't get better by yourself with things like that, no you can't. And the truth is that the happiness of the whole family depends on the happiness of the mother. That's what I always said to my Jaco. I'll leave it now, but promise me you'll think about it, and sort something out."

I sat, not saying anything. The silence between us grew louder and louder.

“Does AJ know what you’re going through?”

“No. I don’t think so. He’s distracted with work and all the drama going on there with the theft and politics and stuff, I don’t want to be another burden to him.” Not me dealing with the shadowy side of being a mother. The mother of his children. No, I had to work through this by myself.

“You know Margie, about your things that you are missing. Be glad that they are there waiting for you when you get home. Some of us, uh, other people in this world don’t have any things to go back to. So for you, this is just a temporary leave of absence.”

She was right, and I didn’t know what to say.

“It’s the people here too, like the one that lives across the road from us, that sells stuff on the pavement. They’re all really getting to me.”

“What about her?”

“Yesterday, I was walking past with Michaela. Luckily Cecile was with us. We’d been round to her cousin, the tailor. He’s making some new curtains for me. Anyway, she called out to us, her hands out to take Michaela. I let her this time, there were only two other ladies around, so it didn’t seem too bad. Cecile greeted them in Fon, and a conversation started. Obviously about Michaela because they were examining her closely, looking behind her ears, squeezing her cheeks so that she opened her mouth. They held her up to look inside, and then one of the other ladies put her finger into Michaela’s mouth to hold her lips back and look around. Her finger! Where do you think that’s been?”

“What did you do?”

“I stepped in, and took Michaela back again, trying to be polite, but I brushed her hand away. Would you go round sticking your fingers into other people’s baby’s mouths?”

She laughed at this a bit. “Not what I normally do. What did Cecile do?”

“She carried on talking, as if nothing was wrong. I think she knows me by now, she’s not upset by what I do anymore. For all I know, she was telling them how crazy I am, while talking with a smile on her face.”

“And then?”

“Then I asked Cecile to greet them from me, and I left them and went inside. Ran a bath for Michaela, and washed her mouth with baby toothpaste as best I could while I waited for the bath water to run. And then, scrubbed her with antiseptic soap. Then Cecile came in a bit later and told me that Mama Shop’s baby, Michaela’s Benin twin, was sick with measles. Very sick, with a fever. They were checking to see if Michaela had any spots in her mouth.

But then I panicked even more, measles is so contagious, and they had their hands all over her.”

"Where is she? The baby."

"She's in the clinic now, around the corner. The doctor is seeing to her there. I feel so sorry for her, I really do. This poor woman stays at the clinic for most of the day, with her other daughter relieving her every now and then, so she can go home and make food for the baby."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Santie said. "It's never nice when children are sick. That little girl must be feeling awful. I wonder what medicines they use here to treat it. I know it is very infectious."

"It is terrible. James has had the vaccine, but not Michaela. Not yet. She'll get it in December when we go back." I had let Michaela sit in the bath, and splash around for ages. I didn't know if the antiseptic soap would kill measles germs, but it made me feel a whole lot better. I wrapped her up in her towel afterwards, and then stood for a minute, just holding her. I closed my eyes, and sniffed into her neck, and smelled her innocence - powder white, soft and baby like. And healthy.

"Do you know," I told Santie, "I have a gecko in my bathroom. He's always there. Been there from when we arrived. Cecile kept trying to chase him out for me, but he kept coming back. So now we've reached an agreement - he's allowed to live in my bathroom provided he listens to all I have to tell him. By now, he knows all my secrets, that funny little see-through guy. Can you believe that? Do you think I'm going mad?"

She laughed, "No, I don't think you're going mad. I would keep an eye on Michaela over the next two weeks or so though. Look for the spots on the insides of her cheeks. And you know Margie, sometimes in this world of ours, the Good Lord gives us situations that we don't know how to handle. And He gives us the power to make a choice. But what you choose is up to you, and then you have to follow through with that choice, and live like you believe it is the right thing. Pray for the strength to do what you need to do. That's the difficult part, not your situation. Like my uncle always said, ask the Lord for a successful crop, but keep your tractor in working order."

How on earth do I respond to that?

"I want to make this all work, but..."

"Well then, make that choice and make it happen" she interrupted me. "You have two children, and a husband who sounds like he's trying to make this easier for you. So now it's

your turn. You have to do what it takes to make that choice work." I didn't want to hear this. If she told me I had to count my blessings, I was going to punch her.

"It's not that easy you know."

"Oh, I know. I know, all right. But I think you still have to learn that."

"Get my tractor is working order, is it?"

She turned to me and nodded.

I opened my mouth to say something, but couldn't think of anything that wouldn't make me sound young and silly. *And like a spoilt brat.*

"What about you?" I asked. "You seem to be fitting in here so much better than I am. What's your secret?" She was so accepting. She was the only one that could make me feel ashamed of how I'd been acting, but she never said anything nasty, she just pointed out the obvious. Not that I always wanted to hear the obvious, of course.

"There's no secret, other than necessity. You're still so young and have such young babies and no mother around to help you. It must be very difficult for you. I don't think I would like my daughter and grandbabies to be so far away. You're still in your twenties. You haven't lived long enough to have to deal with the consequences of your actions. To experience what life can really send down your road if you have done something wrong and deserve to have bad things happen to you."

"Will you tell me what you did wrong, Santie?"

"I haven't figured that out yet. I can only think it was how I raised my boy, my Stefan, so I want to tell you to be careful of what James picks up from you, your attitude. Don't make the same mistakes that I did. My boy also started out so cute, all blonde and smiling and dimply. And then I didn't see it when things started going wrong. I thought he could do no wrong anyway. Turns out the joke's on me."

"What's wrong with Stefan?"

"He's... he's an addict. Drugs. But he's getting treatment now, and we need to pay for that. That's why we're here. To make money, so it's not a question of trying to fit in. There simply is no question. This is how things have to be for us for the next few years. We've accepted that."

I looked over at her, and couldn't think of anything to comfort her. Part of me wanted to scream and shout *well, we don't have a druggie son! We don't have to be here!* But I'm not

that rude, and I zipped up. I suppose we've all got our crosses to bear, and mine sounded very insignificant after that. I don't like feeling insignificant.

Part 3: The Dry Season

When the rains finish, the heat sets in. Both the land and her people get parched, scorched by the tropical sun.

University of Cape Town

29. Cecile

When the zemi dropped me off at the house today to start work, there were lots of people in the street. More than normal, and none of the men were under the mango tree, they were all standing on the other side of the road; at the compound where Agbenyaga lives. I paid the zemi driver, and walked across the road to where I saw Nickson in amongst all the people.

“*Bonjour* Nickson, what is happening?” He looked at me with empty, hollow eyes.

“What is it? Why are all these people here? Tell me, Nickson.”

“This is a sad day. A very sad day for that family who lives in the compound.”

“Who? Which family?”

“Agbenyaga’s. Her baby passed on in the night.”

“Ndjune?” I asked. He nodded at me slowly.

“No! Not Ndjune! How can that be? I saw her just last week, before she got the measles. Was that it? Measles?”

He sucked on his tooth like he always did when he needed to say something that he didn't want to. “Yes. Her fever was too much, and the spirits came to collect her.”

“It’s this weather. It’s getting so hot now, and after the rains, the babies get sick. She was always so small, but there were no problems before.” I felt for the family, she was so little.

“And is anyone else sick there?”

“I don't know, the night guard told me he heard the wailing this morning early.”

I shook my head, my heart sore for them. “I will come and pay my respects to the family later, when some of these people have left.” I walked into *Madame's* house, and found her sitting at the table on the veranda, with James and my little Michaela. I went up to the table to greet her, and lifted James up to give him a squeeze when he jumped out of his seat to come and say hello. As I walked to my room to change into my work clothes, I wondered how I was going to tell *Madame*. Ndjune was born on the same day as Michaela, and now she was dead. Just a few weeks short of her first birthday. I had to tell her, and tell her soon. I didn't know if she would choose to understand what I was saying. But it is the truth, we see it here all the time in Benin. With twins.

I went back towards the house, calling out to James who was already in the sand pit, making castles with his buckets. Michaela was sitting in her chair clipped onto the edge of the table. I lifted her out, and gave her a hug. She is very precious this one, and I squeezed for

a few seconds longer. She is so little still, and smells so good, always fresh like soap. *Madame* washes her every day, she wastes a lot of water, but I can't get her to stop. I know *Madame* worries about her a lot, she was very sick when she was just a few weeks old. This is not going to be very easy. *Merde!* I wish it didn't have to be me.

"Hello *Madame*."

"Hi Cecile, are you okay?" I didn't answer, but I sat down at the table even though she hadn't asked me to yet. I forgot to wait to be asked first. Today was not the day for such formalities.

"What is going on out there? There have been so many people in the street, and I haven't seen Nickson yet, although I know that his motorbike is here. I heard him and the night man talking this morning. It was the loud one, so of course he woke me up with his talking. I didn't understand what they were saying, but I could tell that Nickson could not believe what he was hearing. He sounded upset and shocked. But then they both went out of the gate and I haven't seen them since. And there was some strange kind of singing early this morning. What's going on?"

"It's Mama Shop, *Madame*."

"Mama Shop? What's happened to her?"

"No, not her, the baby Ndjune."

"Oh my, what's happened?" She went whiter than she normally is, her hand coming up to her throat.

"She died last night. From the measles." *Madame* looked at me, then opened her mouth to say something, but then closed it again. Breathed in and out. Opened her mouth and closed it. Something changed in her eyes. She reached across the table to take Michaela from me, and hugged her close to her chest. She started to stroke her fine hair, as she asked how that was possible.

"Died from measles? I've never heard of that actually happening. I mean, I know it can, but... measles? Are you sure?"

"That's what Nickson said earlier when I saw him. He was on the road with the others this morning. There are many people that get sick with measles here, *Madame*. When it gets hot after the rains, that's when we know bad things are coming. Bad things."

"But how can that be? Are the children not vaccinated here? Oh no, wait, she wouldn't have been old enough. James has had the injection, but Michaela hasn't. I was going to take her when we go back for the Christmas holidays." Michaela was getting a bit fidgety, I think she was being squeezed too tight.

"Not everyone can afford to do that, so every year, we get measles killing some children. Sometimes the medicine is old and doesn't work like it should do. And sometimes, the medicine is cursed so it doesn't work for some families. And sometimes the families chose not to do that because it makes the children sick."

"But that is only for a few days, and only a little bit."

"For some people, being sick for a few days is enough to make you die."

"Mama Shop, she was holding Michaela only a few days ago. Measles is very contagious. Who else has got it?"

"I don't know who else has got it. I don't know of anyone. I will pay my respects this afternoon, and I will ask for some more information then."

Madame said nothing. She just held Michaela closer, put her cheek down onto that little head with hair as soft as cotton still on the bush, and started rocking her. I don't think she realised what she was doing.

"But *Madame*, there is more that I need to tell you." She kept her head touching Michaela's, but lifted her eyes to look at me across the table.

"What is it, Cecile?"

"*Madame*, here in Benin, twins have very strong magic. And because Mama Shop called the two girls twins because Michaela and Ndjune were born on the same day, they are now twins. Even by saying that, it calls the magic."

"I don't believe in Benin's magic, Cecile, I believe in God. He's stronger than the magic here."

"This I know is true. I am glad you know it too. But you must also know that the magic of twins is different. And Michaela was said to be the twin of Ndjune, so we must be very careful. Often, when one twin dies, then it comes to call the living one over to the spirit world. Sometimes the living one dies very quickly after the first one. Bad things happen to the one that's left behind, because the spirits of the twins must always be together." *Madame* looked sceptical, she kept on rocking. I had to make her believe me.

"If it is okay with you *Madame*, I will take some meat from your kitchen when I am preparing today's lunch, and put it at my fetish when I get home tonight."

"A fetish? You have a fetish?"

"Yes *Madame*, we all have one."

"Really? I didn't know you had one. I thought you were a Catholic. You told me you went to the cathedral on the road to Ketou."

"I do. It's a very good church, and the priest is an honest man. But I also have a fetish because we mustn't ignore our ancestors and the spirits that live around us every day."

"Ok, whatever, take what you need to satisfy the gods. Do what you must do."

"*Madame*, we must look after Michaela very well over the next few days. The spirit of Ndjune is going to come looking for her. We mustn't let it find her. Please *Madame*, you must be very watchful. Don't leave her alone at all. She must sleep in your bed and someone must be with her all the time in case the other spirit finds her." I wasn't sure that *Madame* was taking me seriously, but I didn't know how to make it any more clear.

"*Madame*, in our culture, this means that bad things are going to happen to this family now. We must stop the spirits. I will ask Agbenyaga to pray to the ancestors to tell them that Michaela is not really the twin of Ndjune. They were born in different countries, to different mothers. It is just a coincidence that they are two girls born on the same day. I will ask Nickson to stay close to the house to look after James more, and he must tell the night watchmen too. The night time is when the spirits come the most because they hide in the darkness.

"This place is not safe for her now. Is it possible that you go to your country for a while *Madame*? While that spirit is looking?"

"Goodness Cecile, no, it can't be that bad."

"Please *Madame*, I have come to love Michaela. You must promise me one thing. Please *Madame*." I think maybe she was starting to understand that this was serious.

"What is that Cecile?"

"*Madame*, I know that living here is not so easy for you, and that you worry about your babies. This shows me that you're a very good mother, all this worry. And I know that sometimes, there is some medicine that you are taking to help you to stop worrying. This is also okay. But *Madame*, please tell me you will not take those tablets for the next while. Maybe you'll sleep so deep that maybe something will happen to Michaela while you are sleeping. I am not comfortable to ask you this *Madame*, but it is better that I am uncomfortable than Michaela is dead. Please *Madame*. Please look after your family now, so that nothing bad happens to you."

30. Margie

"AJ, what if it had been Michaela?"

"Don't go down that road, Margs."

"I've got to. It could have been. It could still be. What if she got infected last week, and just hasn't shown any symptoms yet?" I was trying to squash it down, the mustard yellow panic making me nauseous. I rolled towards him, facing him, our faces close on the pillows.

"We've got to keep a close watch on her."

"That's what we did with Dale, and it didn't work. It didn't work AJ! What if we lose another child? We can't. I don't think I could survive that." I brushed away the tears that were streaming down my cheeks, my mascara burning my eyes.

"This isn't the same as last time, it was through nothing that we did. Or didn't do. There was nothing we could do to save him. He got sick and we gave him the best possible treatment, and he still didn't survive."

"Fat lot of help we were. And we were his parents! We let him down. We let that soft little baby boy down and we let him die."

"We didn't let him die, and you know it. Now stop this. We've got the Med-evac policy, that's what we pay them for. They'll get us out. If it looks even a bit like she's getting sick, we'll take actions. Drastic ones, and get us all out of here."

"But what if it's too late? Dale was so quick. So quick. My little boy. Gone so quickly." AJ reached over and folded me into his arms. "And then, we were living right near the hospital. It was around the corner. And we could speak English and we knew the doctor so well. Here? We've got none of that." Thinking back floored me every time. Every time I tried so very, very hard to remove myself, to look at the situation from the outside, to try and take the anguish out of it. Because the pain punched me in the belly, and I could never breathe. "What if we had got him to the doctor earlier last time?"

"You know you took him to the doctor."

"But... but what if he had been diagnosed properly from the start?"

"Don't go there Margs, we've been through all of this. Don't go there now." But I couldn't stop.

"But we were so close then! It's so far here. It's so far away. What are we doing so far away from proper doctors? Proper hospitals?" I was trying to get the words out, over gasping

for air. The black vortex was sucking me down, down, down, and I couldn't stop it. "I can't take this anymore AJ, I can't. We've got to look after our babies properly, not live in this shit hole where babies die of measles. Who dies of measles?" He wasn't even trying to answer me now, he knew the drill.

"And Cecile's on about this twin thing and that bad fortune is coming our way. What if she's right?" I was hiccupping and trying to blow my nose. It wasn't working.

"You don't believe in that. No bad fortune is coming our way. We don't believe in Voodoo."

"Do you remember how his little fingers used to get stuck in my long hair back then? How he would grab it while he was feeding, and twist his hand all in it? Then give it a yank! Cheeky little monkey."

"My favourite was how he always looked so proud of himself when he managed to roll over by himself, onto his tummy. He always seemed so surprised at his genius, and then would giggle like he used to."

"Let me go get them."

"Who?"

"The kids. I need them next to me now. Make sure they're ok. They can sleep with us tonight. She said we mustn't let Michaela sleep alone. And I'm not leaving James out of this." I could feel him roll his eyes.

"Margs, focus on the important stuff here. You don't want to scare James. You don't want him to see you like this. And you definitely can't be talking like this in front of him. So either you get yourself together, and go and be with them, or you stay here, and get this out of your system. But not both." I hated when he was right. I rolled over onto my side, away from him, and tasted the salt as my tears rolled into my mouth. They say that having children is like watching your heart grow outside your body. I never used to know what that meant, until I had children, and lost a child. Now I knew just how true it was.

31. Cecile

“*Maman*, here’s some meat for supper tonight. It’s duck, I know you love it.”

“Ah, thank you Osiamé. That is very kind! But why? You’ve never done that before.”

“I’ve never been able to afford it before, but now I know where I can get it. Easily and it didn’t cost me anything.”

“Didn’t cost you anything? Where’s it from?”

“It was a, um, gift. From someone I bumped into at the market.”

“Who was there? Someone from your soccer club?”

“No, no. Someone from work. The streets were still busy and after I dropped that Keld off at the bar they all go to, I had a drink with my friend.”

“Do I know him?”

“No! Um, I don’t think so. Probably not.” He sounded strange, but then maybe I was quizzing him too much.

“Oh, ok. So where did he get the duck from?”

“Why all the questions, *Maman*? Feels like I’m back at work! They’re always interrogating everyone there.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry. I’m just interested. I’m proud of your job.”

“Yeah, well, there’s lots going on that you don’t know about. But these people, they’re nice. They help me at my job, and I learn a lot when I talk to them. They talk about politics and philosophy and business and stuff like that. So uh, he bought me the duck to give to you. He felt sorry for a man that had come in to town to sell his livestock, and he only had the one duck left so he was offering it at a good price. The man was keen to go home, and still had an hour to travel.”

I didn’t know why he was telling me all these details now. But I liked hearing about it all, so I was pleased. He has matured a lot in the last few months since he has worked for the company. He was growing into a man. He was right, I wouldn’t understand a lot of the things he did at work. He said it is so much more than just driving. The driving helped him to do his other roles. I wasn’t too sure what these other roles were, but I thought that maybe he was advancing up the ladder, and he was just too modest to boast to his mother all the time. He is sensitive like that.

“I would like to meet him sometime, this man who bought me the duck. It would be polite to thank him. Please invite him to the house soon.”

When I got to work that day, Santie and Aretha were there with Margie. It was very early, but I presumed that one of their husbands had dropped them off on his way to work. They were making plans for the big feast they are going to have for this duck festival that is happening soon, at the beginning of November. The Danish people have a special way that they need to prepare the ducks so they needed to ask me where to get some of the ingredients.

“I don’t know these things, prunes and pine nuts. We will need to go to Cotonou, to the French supermarchés there.” I wondered if it was really worth it, just for some ingredients. These people do some strange things sometimes.

“That’ll be so exciting! We’ll make it a girls’ day out, to the city.”

I thought to myself *Madame* had forgotten it is a two hour trip, each way, to Cotonou.

“We’ll ask one of the drivers to take us.”

“Ask for Osiamé. It will be easier with him, and I’ll go too, to show you.” It sounded like a lot of work for just one meal, but it did seem important to them.

“Thanks Cecile. That’ll be a good thing. The city traffic still scares me a bit. And I must admit that I’ve never cooked duck before, so I hope these recipes are right, and we can go according to them. I hope the chef knows too.”

“We have duck here quite often in Benin. Well for a special meal. I had it for dinner last night actually. It was very good.”

“Duck? Really? Where did you get it?”

“It was a gift, from Osiamé and his friend. They said they got it from someone at the market late last night.” I wasn’t going to tell them that they got it for cheaper. Osiamé didn’t deserve that. It was a good thing that he did. What I did tell them was how I cooked it, and how Osiamé’s goodness made it taste so much sweeter.

Madame Santie sighed. “It’s like that. The one that is cooking adds more than ingredients to the pot. They add their feelings too. You know, never once in my son’s life has he ever brought something home for dinner, just because he knows I like it. Only more people that I needed to feed, and who, when they sat at my table, didn’t say anything to me or Jaco, but kept looking around the house at all the things we had. Things they could steal. You’re a lucky woman Cecile.”

She seemed very sad as she said this. I think her son weighs very heavy on her heart. It is so unfortunate. My son is the type that makes a mother proud. He'd lifted me up again, since those dark days when my husband passed. They were very difficult times then, especially when the people who were once my friends turned their backs on me like they did. I can't say I blame them, but it still hurt. It's really bad when people you don't even know spit on the ground as they walk past you because of what they have heard.

But watching my son grow, and knowing that how I was raising him was turning him into a good child, that made it a little easier. And now that he had grown up, I think people look at him, and said maybe I was a good woman. Maybe what happened at that time was not because of me. It would be very nice if the way the people here in Bohicon spoke to me properly, and looked me in the eyes. If it went back to the way that it used to be, before my husband died.

University of Cape Town

32. Santie

When the men came home tonight, they brought us some of their first biltong. They have got it perfect – the meat is dried just like I like it, salty and dry on the outside, but still soft and meaty inside. It tasted so much of home, of hunting and the farm, of Saturday afternoons watching rugby on TV with our friends and our families, and of all the school and church bazaars where we would sell the biltong Jaco made. So many good times and it brought back many memories. It's funny how your memory sits in your taste buds.

"I'm glad you like it," Dennis said as he got up from the lounge. "I'm off to bed."

"To bed? Now? Supper will be ready in about an hour only."

"I won't have any thanks. Not tonight. I'm not feeling very well, so I'll just take me and my headache to bed."

"As long as that's all you're taking to bed," Jaco joked.

"*Sies man!*" I said, but we all laughed a bit. "Dennis, you weren't feeling very well this morning either. Have you been feeling bad all day?"

"It's been getting worse all day. If I'm still like this tomorrow, I'll ask the nurse to have a look at me." That made me feel better because these men, they never like to go and see a doctor. And here in Benin, there are lots of sicknesses that we don't normally have, and of course the malaria is very bad. We are careful always, and put on mozzie spray at night when we go out, and wear long pants. But that doesn't mean we can't still get it.

I know Margie and AJ and the two kids have had it, but they always pick it up with blood tests very early, and so that's ok. Then you can still treat it. It's when you leave it and those little mosquito larvae in your liver start to breed that you get really sick and can die. Margie has told me before how careful she has to be with the children always. I've asked Cecile about it too - she says she has had it many times in her life, and it is very bad when you are sick. Aretha too says that it is very common in Tanzania, and she knows many people who have died, and also a lot who got better. I think it also depends on your constitution, you know.

Jaco has the constitution of an ox, with the things he puts into his body, and still manages to be so healthy. I like to remind him that it is me who looks after him so well and makes him such good food that he never gets sick. Then he usually kisses my cheek and pats my bottom and says thank you for looking after him. If I must be honest, this is why I say it; I like him to

kiss me. But now I must stop talking out of the bedroom, I can feel my cheeks starting to glow. I think that's why Jaco does it too, to see me blush. He always laughs, every time we go through this. I like it.

When Dennis went to bed, then Jaco told me that Dennis was also feeling both angry and sad, as well as having the headache.

"Why? What's wrong? Did something happen at the butchery?"

"No, not the butchery. With the ducks – there's one missing. Somebody must have come and stolen it last night. Dennis is mad because he says it feels like one of his own kids got taken, and sad because they are all nearly ready for the feast."

"Shame, maybe that's why he has got a headache, all this worrying about the duck, and who stole it, and how many more are going to be taken."

"Exactly, the feast is in three days still, how we going to make sure none others get taken?"

"I didn't think many locals knew about the ducks. Sure, I mean, the ones that work in the houses there and the people they tell, but no-one walks past there just by chance."

"That's the problem. Their cage is right behind the bar. And outsiders just don't come there, not with all the watchmen and night guards around to keep the locals out. Dennis says he can't understand how somebody not from the company would have been able to get in. I think he's right, which means that the person who stole the duck works for us, and has access to the bar."

"Not necessarily. These people talk in the language that we don't understand. You never know what they're saying to each other, so I am sure the news has got out firstly that we do have a whole lots of ducks there. And it will get out that now a duck's gone missing and there will be an investigation."

"The problem is it takes up time now to investigate such trivial matters. And our security guys are stretched thinly enough as it is with all the diesel theft. They're not coping there, and now they're going to be diverted to look into this, if only to set the standard, and send out a warning."

"And there was Cecile telling us earlier how she had duck for supper last night. While we were planning how we're going to buy the ingredients to cook them. Ducks! It seems that's all we talk about at the moment."

33. Margie

"You look good tonight" AJ said when he came into the room.

"Thanks! Not too shabby yourself, sir!" I caught his eye in the bathroom mirror where I was putting on my makeup.

"Us? Looking good? Like this?" He twirled James around, both of them finishing in a deep bow. He was holding Michaela who squealed in delight as she nearly touched the floor during his bow.

"Again! Again!" James shrieked. And so AJ did. Again and again and again. *How did he do it?* The kids loved playing with him. He was patient enough to do things over and over. I wanted to warn him to stop before Michaela puked up all her supper porridge in the upping and downing, but I caught myself in time. They were having fun. He put them down, and they carried on twirling, acting giddy and falling on the floor.

"And look at Mommy, isn't she pretty?" Coming up behind me, he put his arms around me and kissed me neck. "Mmm, you smell nice."

I put down my lipstick, and swivelled around in his arms for a proper kiss. It felt good. His sexiness smelt all smoky blue. "Goodness, it's been a long time since I had a kiss like that. Let's ditch the party, put the kids to bed, and stay here."

"Not after all our hard work today. There's no way I'm missing tonight. Sorry AJ, you'll just have to wait."

"Damn, that's what I thought you'd say. It's been so long, whenever you're ready, just say the word."

"What word would that be?"

"Any word! I don't care."

"Ok, ok. Soon. When it's not so hot."

"So that would be next year's rainy season. I'll pencil you in for June." We were laughing now. "Was it difficult to get it all organised?"

"Yip, quite a logistical challenge, but it was fun. Gave us all something to do with our time. We've set up the tables that were in the mess and got some more in from the bar and have used some trestle tables to seat all thirty two of us. We got Nickson and Jeffoir to carry our dining room chairs there, and all the chairs from the bar. There's no such thing as matching table cloths or cutlery, but we put all of ours together, and the cooks rifled up some

more from somewhere. It's a good thing everyone is going to the same dinner tonight - there's nothing left in the bar, or our house or Santie's.

"The most difficult was getting all of the ducks cooked. We did two runs in this little oven of ours, so that was four cooked, then Santie did two ducks, and the cooks did the rest in the mess. Thank heavens for them, they did all the gravy and veggies and stuff. Although don't be surprised when you get your gravy served out of our milk jug..."

"Sounds like you ladies and the cooks are all organised. Well done!"

"Thanks! Good bonding times, although I'm sure the locals all think we're absolutely crazy. Cecile has been polite enough to not say anything to me, but I saw them, the house staff, catching each others' eyes, and I could read the speech bubbles floating unsaid above their heads."

"Really? What did they say?" He laughed.

"Nothing that I can say in front of the kids..." I gave him a wink over my eyeliner pencil.

"Yip, must seem pretty strange to them, the lengths we're going to for this festival. But it's so important to the staff. They need a boost, some motivation. We're fighting a losing battle with this diesel theft, and none of us are used to not being able to solve things. We're running out of options, and now our security guys are getting direct threats. Warning us to back off or else. Which means we must be getting close to the truth, but we're not there yet. It's definitely got something to do with politics, but we can't prove a thing, so it's carrying on. In our face. Which sucks.

"It's been a tricky balance over the last few weeks – trying to downplay tonight with the domestic staff and the drivers etc, but up the excitement with the salaried staff. We're spending a lot of money and time and effort on basically eating, if you think about it. I'm not too sure how well it is being received. And like you say, the locals must think we're crazier than ever. Word definitely gets out and about here."

AJ had gone serious. This was tough on him. "I'm glad that there are still some live ducks left. I'm not quite up to explaining to James and Michaela where all the ducks have gone. At least they can still go and feed them with Dennis now. It's always the highlight of their day, when Dennis arrives. And it's the cutest thing to see them save their crusts and go and put them in the duck packet. I think Dennis enjoys the evening ritual too. The way that James holds his hand, and he sits Michaela on his hip so comfortably, you can see he's used to little ones."

"Yes, he's told me too how much he loves those few minutes with children. For such a male world, they've really managed to worm their way into many hearts."

"I dig the fact that there are so many oldies adopting them as grandchildren. I always see Dennis get a faraway look in his eyes when he talks about his own grandchildren. I know he misses them very much."

"I can't believe Dennis's not going to be there tonight. I went and took him some lunch by the way. He seemed chatty enough, but he was sweating. Obviously got a fever. That's a manky clinic, that one. I've never been into the section with the beds before. They're all on top of each other. He's attached to a drip, which is just the plastic sac hanging on a nail from a wooden pole. Splinter city. Thank heavens Nickson saw him arrive at the clinic this morning. When he went in to greet him, and talk to the doctor, he saw that Dennis hadn't taken any sheets or mosquito nets. Did you know you've got to take your own bedding there?"

"Really? No, I didn't know that. You lend him some?"

"Yes, and there's no food at all. You've got to take everything of your own. Heaven help you if you have no family or friends to look after you."

"So you took him lunch you said?" AJ had stopped what he was doing by now, and was back to serious mode, focusing on what I was saying, how Dennis was.

"Yes, Nickson came and told Cecile that Dennis was booked into the clinic. She knew what to do. He's got malaria, and the doctor's treating him. But it comes in waves. I'm glad he went to the doctor finally. Santie tells me he's not been feeling well for a few days already. We took him some tea this morning, and then some lunch later, and I packed him a basket with water and snacks and stuff. I asked Chef to make up a plate of duck and take it around there this evening, so at least he could share a little part of this whole thing. Along with Lars, he's the one that's done all the work growing these ducks."

"Margs, can I leave the kids here with you for a few minutes? I just want to pop around there quickly and see that he's ok."

"You'll be quick? I'll call Cecile in too, she can start looking after them a bit earlier."

Fortunately the clinic was only around the corner, sharing a back wall with our bar and swimming pool, so Dennis was close to us, even if not actually with us. I hoped he was going to be ok. Malaria's a bad thing, and to be honest, I still don't trust the doctors around here. Or rather, I think they've got a hell of a job to do with not sophisticated enough equipment and medicine to treat the number of people that are sick all the time. Or even just *enough* equipment and medicine full stop.

34. Santie

It was nice to get so dressed up for a party again, and to go out for such a special dinner. This has been planned for so long, with Lars doing all the organizing, but at the end of the day, it was up to us and the cooks to get it all cooked at the right time, and we ladies also decorated the mess.

It looks really festive - we have bright tablecloths, and pretty serviettes, and we put candles everywhere, and some flowers that we managed to find from the gardens. Tonight is dining African style with Danish menus and South Africans organizing it. The United Nations would be proud. I wonder what the locals think, like Cecile and Nickson and Jeffoir and the others. They did a lot of work too, fetching and carrying everything, and carting dining room tables down the streets. They said the other people in the streets kept on asking them what they were doing, and laughed at them when they explained about the party the *Jovos* were having where you kill all the ducks then eat them. I'm not sure if they think we're weird, or if they're as caught up in all the excitement as we are.

It is just so sad that Dennis isn't here tonight, that he's in the clinic. Can you believe it? He's even attached to a drip. The doctor finally put him in the ward there after seeing him this morning. There are lots of beds squashed into it, and lots of sick people on the beds. It stinks in there. Sickness has a terrible smell. All the doors and windows are open, but everyone is sweating with fevers and the BO is something terrible. All the fans do is stir the air around to make sure that everyone gets to smell it. Dennis is sick enough to not smell it. I suppose he adds to it, and he probably smells funny to the others.

We took Dennis some clean clothes for tomorrow, but after seeing the place, we didn't know if it was safe to leave them there, so we'd rather go back tomorrow and take them then. I made him some crunchy biscuits and a flask of coffee. He doesn't want to eat much but he must keep his energy up to fight this terrible thing. He didn't look very good when we saw him just before coming here, but the doctor says it goes like that, in waves. When all the parasites hatch in the liver, then there is a wave of fever as they go into the blood. We saw AJ there too, he had come round to check on him as well.

“We’ll keep an eye on him tonight, and see how he’s doing. Maybe check him into the proper hospital in Cotonou, depending on what the doctor says,” AJ said quietly to us. But Dennis caught it.

“Don’t worry about me tonight. Please go and have a good time. If I can’t actually be there, then at least I want to know that you’ve all had a good time.”

“I asked chef to bring you some of the duck, it’s surprisingly good. Those ducks were raised on a lot of love, and you can taste it.”

Dennis laughed. “I want to hear proper stories about everything. You’ve got to remember everything to tell me in the morning.”

The dinner was wonderful, it all worked out so well. Lars made some more speeches about what we were celebrating, but I think that with so many people so far from home and the people that they love that everyone was willing to celebrate anything. And boy, did we celebrate!

The food was delicious - those chefs are very good to have everything hot and dished up for so many people in such a basic kitchen. And the heat in there! It was like a sauna! I didn’t want to go too close because I didn’t want to get perspiration marks on my dress. A lady doesn’t choose to do that sort of thing, you know. After the meal was over, and we had blessed the ducks with that strong Danish firewater again, the men were all getting quite loud. Here we go again, I thought to myself.

Then Lars stood up and made a toast to Dennis who should have been there, but wasn’t, and everyone got quiet for a few minutes, thinking about him. And then my Jaco got up and said this is nonsense, and Dennis wouldn’t want us to get all morbid and so we should drink another toast to his speedy recovery. Which everyone did and then we all sang For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow, and some Danish song that sounded like the same sort of thing, and then the party really began. It really was too hot in the mess by then, so the men decided to take all the chairs and tables outside, and to make a long table outside in the middle of the road. One of them had road closing beacons in their car, so they just put them on either side of the table, and that was it. A celebration in the middle of the street. These men! What will they think of next? This is just another thing that Susanna will never believe when I tell her.

While the others were taking the furniture outside, Lars came up to us. “Thanks Jaco for the toast, it was a good thing. It’s so sad about Dennis, come, let’s you and me toast our friend.” They’re Dennis’s close friends. AJ saw this, and said “I’m popping around to check

on him again quickly, I'll report back in a few minutes. Don't tell the others, let's not kill the good mood of the party."

It was quite a while later that he got back to us. Margie had stayed with us at first, but then when AJ didn't come back, she went to the clinic too to see what was happening. When they finally returned, AJ called Jaco and Lars aside.

"Dennis isn't doing well at all, we've got to get him through to a hospital in Cotonou. As quickly as possible."

"Why Cotonou, and not Abomey hospital?"

"The clinic doc recommends it, he's phoned a colleague there with better equipment. He's going to discuss with this other doctor the treatment that Dennis needs. He's not reacting to the medicine. I'm happier with him there as well. Closer to the airport in case we need to get him out."

"Do you think it will come to that?" Jaco asked?"

"Hope not. Please God, not. But I'm not taking any chances. I'm trying to get hold of Osiamé, he's supposed to be on duty tonight, but he's not answering his phone." I could see AJ getting more and more agitated. He looked like a volcano, just rumbling at the moment, and giving out the warning puffs of smoke.

"Lars, could you go to Cotonou as well? In your own car? It would help if you could speak to the doctors in French and then translate to me back here. I'm going to start organizing the Med-evac, get them on standby. In fact, fuck it, I'm going to get them to come anyway, fetch Dennis and fly him to South Africa. I'd rather risk the waste than risk Dennis. Damn it Osiamé, answer your phone! Lars, how much have you had to drink?"

"Actually, I haven't had anything since that last toast with Jaco, which was quite a while ago. Oh, and I had coffee after that. I'm fine. I was just about to start on the Jagermeister with the others, good thing you got here now. Ok, I'm going to slip out, go pack a bag."

"Jaco, will you do me a favour and stay here, at the party? If anyone asks, you need to reassure them, say that Dennis was being transferred to Cotonou, and that Lars would be sending news to me when he get to the hospital there. I'm going home now too, see if Cecile knows where Osiamé is, or why he wasn't answering his phone. Margs, you coming or staying?"

"Coming. Sorry Santie, you ok here by yourself?"

"Yes, I'll stay." So now it was just Jaco and me who knew the truth about what was happening with Dennis, and how bad he really was. I saw that look come over Jaco's eyes, and knew what it meant. He doesn't handle stress well, or people being sick. Somebody put a

drink in Jaco's hand and told him not to look so glum and to come back to the party. Without even looking at me, Jaco put his arm around this guy, and headed back to the long table, throwing back that drink in one swig, and banging the glass on the table. The others took this as a sign, and topped him up. I looked at my watch, got a cup of coffee and settled in for the long haul. We were in for a rough night.

It was when Jaco put his head down on his arms at the table, and I saw his shoulders shake that I had had enough. You know, a man doesn't just cry like that at a table. That's not right. Not my Jaco. At least tonight he wasn't fighting again, like that last episode, but this was scarier to me. This wasn't how it normally turned out, and I didn't know what was coming next anymore.

The fight seemed to have gone out of him now, and instead he was sad, and he was showing it. This was the scary part – he never showed his weakness. Never. Not even when our Stefan was put away, he just carried on. Faced the music as he always says. But now, crying? In public? What was going on? I know that he had a friend who died when they were fighting the war together; this friend died because he got sick. But that's all I know, Jaco has never told me anything else.

I want to know what happened in that war. I've had enough trying to sort this out from the sidelines, without knowing anything. Why does nobody talk about it? And it was that night, sitting there at that table in the middle of the dirt road, there with puddles of water and chickens and goats wandering around, there in front of a rusty half truck with weeds growing out of it, there that something cracked inside of me. I can't go on like this. This man is also sick. Not physically, but mentally. I have never let myself think this before. I've never wanted to face it. But now, I must think about how I am going to bring this up with him. Because enough is enough, and this man must accept it, help me to help him.

I must be the strong one, and take control now. I'm not sure how I'm going to tell my friends back home. I don't know, we'll cross that bridge later. I've got to get him to go and see someone proper, who can talk to him and then tell me what is wrong and what we must do to fix it. Because I don't know how to do this by myself. This big strong man who is crying like a baby in front of everybody. Not that the others are noticing mind you, they're all far too drunk by now. But I notice. That's my soul mate, that man. The father of my children. My husband for a very long time. The man I know very little about. The man that I realise I must save.

35. Cecile

I was looking after James and Michaela because *Madame* and *Monsieur* were at the duck party, so I was asleep in Michaela's room when *Madame* came in and woke me up. She was shaking my shoulder and calling my name when I drifted awake. Then I sat up suddenly - why was she waking me?

"*Oui Madame*, I am awake. What is going on?"

"Cecile, has Osiamé been here to see you tonight?"

"No, *Madame*, he is working tonight."

"Well, that's the thing, we can't reach him on his cell phone, and the *Monsieur* needs him urgently."

How would I know where he is, I've been asleep! "Did you try him on his personal cell phone as well?"

"I don't know. I'll ask him."

She came into the room again, and asked me for that number. I sat up, and wound my wrap over my pyjamas. I could hear *Monsieur* pacing up and down somewhere in the house, talking on his phone, and I didn't want him to see me in my nightie. *Madame* and I went out into the passage where we could turn on the light and not disturb the children. I gave it to her, and she ran down the corridor to the *Monsieur*. Why was she running?

I heard him punching in the numbers, then silence. Obviously waiting for Osiamé to pick up. Then I heard the *Monsieur* swearing; I've never heard that before. Something must be very wrong. I walked closer to the lounge, then stood quietly in the lounge. *Monsieur* was on the phone again, then I heard him greet Sifuel, and apologise for waking him up. I heard *Monsieur* say that he knows Sifuel wasn't on duty, but that he really needed his help for an emergency. Sifuel had to come and fetch *Monsieur* Dennis from the clinic as soon as he could get here, and drive him to Cotonou. *Cotonou! At this time of night?* Those roads are dangerous in the dark. He must be very sick.

Monsieur noticed me standing there in the room, and held up a hand for me to be quiet while he was on the phone. I had nothing to say anyway, but I nodded. He told Sifuel that he couldn't find Osiamé and that's why he had to phone him and ask him this. Even though

Sifuel wasn't on duty. That *Monsieur* appreciated his help. That *Monsieur* would meet him at the clinic in about fifteen minutes. When he got off the phone, he turned to me.

"Cecile, we have a very urgent problem. We are desperately looking for Osiamé. Have you heard from him recently?"

"No," I told him "the last time was this morning before I came to work. I didn't go home this afternoon because of all the preparations and then looking after the children tonight."

"Did he say that he was doing anything tonight?"

"He said he was working. He had something very important to do."

"Well, turns out he does, and now he is not here." The phone rang again, and he turned away to answer it. His voice got louder and louder, and sounded very harsh in the hot night air. He was getting angry with whoever was on the phone. Eventually the call ended.

"I am sorry on his behalf, *Monsieur*."

"Thanks Cecile, but it's not your problem. It's not you I am angry with, it's Osiamé. We have a very urgent situation, and he's the driver on duty, he should be here to help us. All this wasting time could kill Mr Dennis." And then his phone rang again, and he shouted out to *Madame* that he was going to meet Lars at the clinic. James was awake by now with all the shouting, and *Madame* had gone into his room to calm him.

I could feel it all over again. I couldn't believe that this was happening. I was sick to my stomach, scared that things were going out of control, and that I was going to end up in a bad place again. But maybe something had happened to Osiamé? Maybe he'd been in an accident? Maybe someone stole his phone? I wondered if anyone thought about that? That maybe something bad has happened to my son?

I walked outside to the veranda, and phoned Benedictine, woke her up. She went to his room to check if Osiamé was asleep there. He wasn't, and she said his car wasn't outside. Benedictine said that Osiamé had arrived home for supper with the company car. He had had to drive a few people to the duck party, and so had done a few trips. Osiamé was supposed to be meeting them at the bar later. They all knew to find him there from eleven, so he had said to Benedictine that he had a few hours spare in the middle and was going to be meeting someone on some important business. *But what other business did he have that was more important?* That was his job, I thought that *was* the important business.

The dread in my stomach grew stronger, and I focused on keeping calm and carrying on breathing like normal. I phoned Nickson, and asked if he had seen Osiamé, but no. Neither

had Jeffoir, nor any of the others that I phoned. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. What do I do? I went and asked *Madame* if she needed anything else or if I could be excused for the night. She said I could go, and asked if I was leaving.

"Yes *Madame*, I need to know if my Osiamé is safe. Maybe he has been in an accident and is hurt. I will go to my cousin and ask him to help me to find Osiamé. I am very worried, *Madame*. I don't know where he could be. I don't know why his phone would be off when he is supposed to be working. This is not like him. He is always so responsible, you can always trust him to do the right thing. But now *Madame*, he's not, and I don't know why. I don't know what is happening."

"I'm sorry I can't help you any more tonight, Cecile."

Yes, me too. I looked after her son all the time, and now when it was my son, I could not turn to her. My son may have been many years older, but no matter how old they are, your son is always your son.

36. Shooting

The man narrowed his eyes, and it was evident that he wasn't planning on going down without a fight. *Merde! Just finish it!* He was sweating, he could feel it trickling down his chest, even at this time of night. The man had always made him feel small, like he couldn't do things properly but now he was the one holding the gun. Ha! He was the one in charge now. Couldn't be told what to do. He didn't have to take any more insults from this man. No more "You drive like a bloody African." or "You idiot, slow down! Are you trying to kill me?" No. No more. This man was rude, he had never liked him, and now he wasn't sad to be the one chosen to kill him.

"Why are you doing this? What do you want?"

Whatever he says, don't speak. The instructions were clear.

"You know who I am, easy to spot in this town. Why do you choose tonight to shoot me?"

Just do it!

"I think someone has made you do this, this isn't your idea. That's why you are not shooting. Tell them from me not to be such a coward, and to come and get me themselves, without sending someone like you. Someone who looks like they can't do the job."

Enough!

"Who paid you to do this? And what will your mother think if you kill someone?"

What did he know of my mother? My mother's a good woman. Leave her out of this. But it stopped him for a minute, the mention of her. His courage dropped. But then he found the anger from all the humiliation, going back way before this man. Back to when he was a child, and his dad had died, and people humiliated his family. He took a ragged breath and steadied himself again. *You're a mother - a motherfucker!* He caught the small movement out the corner of his eye, the man moving his hand onto the gear stick. He was going to floor it. He couldn't do it, knew he could not kill this man now that he had brought his mother into it, but damn it, he wanted to hurt him. Hurt him so bad. He lowered the gun, pointed it down and pulled the trigger. He watched the man's eyes widen in shock as the bullet tore open his leg.

37. Emergency report

Dennis Donaldson: It is with sadness and great concern that I announce the death of Dennis Donaldson. Dennis was a deeply respected, well-liked team leader, employed by this company for the past 28 years. Dennis died of organ failure early this morning following the diagnosis of malaria. We are currently arranging for repatriation of his body.

Additional correspondence will follow concerning poor medical handling of Dennis once immediate emergency requirements have been met. Emergency medical and air evacuation services have been below acceptable standards, and this matter is to be taken up with senior management of the companies involved.

Keld Nielson: More bad news is that Nielson was attacked on the night of 10 November, after the Martinmas Eve festivities. He has sustained a bullet wound in his left thigh, and while he has lost a lot of blood, he is receiving medical attention and is out of immediate danger. At this point we are not sure who his attacker was or why Nielson was in that particular area of town. Our security company is investigating the crime, as are the local police.

More details to follow on both of these incidents shortly. The atmosphere among staff in Bohicon is both tense and despondent. Staff are saddened at the untimely death of Donaldson, and justly concerned about their safety due to shooting of the project CEO. We need to get to the bottom of both of these issues as soon as possible.

38. Santie

Ai, this is breaking my heart. This man, this good, kind, caring friend has now passed on. I can't believe that he will not be coming back to us. What are we going to tell his wife? How will she ever understand that we tried to do everything we could, but it just wasn't enough? Unless you live in this place, you will never understand.

I will write to her, and try to explain as best as I can. Not about his dying, although I will talk about that a little bit, because I think a wife would want to know, but I must tell her about how her husband was loved by everybody here. How he was a good man, who always spoke about her, and their children, and their grandchildren. And all the Christmas presents that he has bought for all of them. I must send them back to her and tell her what he bought for each of them. The computer games for the grandchildren, how he laughed when he realised he had made a mistake and bought French games for them at the market, but they were so cheap that he thought the children would figure out how to play them anyway. He always said the grandkids were the cleverest of the whole family, they way they learnt things so fast.

And the trainers that he bought for his wife for when she does aerobics in the church hall. He knew the type she liked - the ones that were soft and didn't squeak on the wooden floor, and so when he saw those in the market, he bought them to take home to her at Christmas. How proud he was to have found them, and how happy he was because he knew she would be so happy.

He was always trying to make his family happy, and so I think I must write to her about these things, because that is what I would want to know about. And I must remember to tell her that Lars was with him at the end, that he wasn't alone, that he had a good friend with him all the time. Oh my goodness, look at me now with the tears landing in my coffee. I am having a cup here quietly in my room, by myself, because I don't know how to face anybody else with this just yet. None of us do.

I must find a place that will print out photos, so I can put that photo of Lars and Dennis when they were feeding the ducks last week into the envelope with the letter. I think she might like to see that, to see the man that was with Dennis at the end. I hope she understands that Lars was doing his best with those doctors in Cotonou, and that he was the best one to be with Dennis, well, because they were friends and all, but also because he is the best in both

French and English. And I must tell her about AJ and what he did that night to make sure Dennis got to the hospital as soon as he could.

But the question that I can't get out of my head is what if this was me? What if someone was writing to me, wondering what I would like to know about my husband dying? Please dear Lord, don't take my Jaco just yet. Not when we are just starting to figure things out. Not when he is just starting to see that he needs help.

Oh, that is something I must definitely add - I must thank her, as one wife to another, for how her husband helped my husband, and therefore how he helped me. My coffee was tasting saltier and saltier, but it didn't matter. Because Dennis was a good friend to my Jaco, and had fun with him in the butchery, making all the biltong and the sausage. And that by helping Jaco there, Dennis helped him to stay away from the booze. Jaco told me they didn't really talk that much about work and stuff, more about how they used to live in South Africa and on other contracts, and Jaco always said it was nice to have someone to talk about other things to. And sometimes, they wouldn't talk at all; that was usually when one of them brought up something about the war.

Those conversations are the ones that Dennis told me were the best ones, the ones where neither of them had to say anything. Now who am I going to turn to, that really understands? I am going to miss him so much. Dennis was helping me to help Jaco. I want to ask the Good Lord why He took Dennis at this stage - I still need him here, but I can't do it, because who am I to ask God such things? I know I am being selfish. His wife and children and grandbabies are going to miss him so much. They've lost a husband and a father and a grandpa.

It hurts very much. So I know it is very wrong of me to be thinking about Jaco not dying, not leaving me, at a time like this, but somehow I think Dennis would understand. I think he was one of the very few people who would.

39. Margie

"Come to bed, Babe. There's nothing more you can do now. Tomorrow's going to be another long day."

"I can't believe he's dead. It was so quick. I never thought it would be so quick." AJ seemed in a bit of a trance, shaking his head from side to side. I went over to take the phone out of his hand, and to lead him to bed.

"Wait Margs, what if it had been us?"

"I know. It terrifies me AJ. Like with that little girl over the road."

"It's not worth it, is it?"

"What?"

"All this money we're making. This 'Ode to Me' that I'm working on. It's all about me and my career. And it's not worth dying for. Dennis, wanting to give it a final push before retirement, earn a cosy packet to make his retirement a bit more comfortable. And now, Lindsay has to live that retirement time alone. Without Dennis. Who has been working all his life for this time. And now he's dead."

"You can't think about this now, you need to get some sleep." I said this, but me, I hadn't been sleeping for months now.

"I can't sleep now, maybe they'll phone."

"They won't phone now. Now it's left to the admin dept. They'll phone during office hours. You need to be strong for tomorrow. Come on."

"I don't want to do it tomorrow."

"I know my baby, I know."

"I think I am just going to hide in my bed all day. With you. Don't make me go." I smiled. Not many people see this side of AJ. This vulnerable side where he didn't have to act old or mature and responsible for all these people. Didn't have to go and identify bodies with customs people. Didn't have to arrange to get bodies back to South Africa. Didn't have to explain events to devastated wives and families. Didn't have to deal with incompetent companies that don't do what they promise and get you the hell out of a godforsaken country when you need it, and not after you're dead because the plane wouldn't take off without the doctor giving written consent. All good and well as policy, but fucking useless when there was no electricity at the time, or paper in the fax machine to send the fax to get the plane to

leave South Africa, and come and fetch you. It's the little things that kill you. All the little things.

"Ok, we'll stay in bed all day, and when we wake up tomorrow, it'll all be gone. Everything sorted."

"Thanks. That's what I want." I steered him into the bathroom to brush his teeth. The gecko peeped out from behind the cabinet, checking on us. At least some things stay constant. I got out his pyjamas for him, opened up the mosquito net on his side of the bed, and folded back the sheets for him. It was like he was in a trance. Not thinking, just doing. I turned the aircon on, and tried to cool the room, so at least he'd be able to sleep properly. Normally, it was so hot at this time that we couldn't sleep, and just tossed around until we were so exhausted that we finally succumbed. I offered him one of my sleeping tablets too, and finally convinced him to take it. He hadn't known that I had any until then, but he needed them more than I needed the secret.

The phone call at sparrows the next morning woke us both up. AJ fought his way through the mosquito net to grope around on his bedside table for the phone. It carried on ringing.

"Quick! Answer it. It's going to wake the kids."

"It's not here. Where the hell is it?"

"Oh, the lounge. From last night." He escaped from the bed and got to the door, but it stopped ringing.

"Damn it."

"Who the hell is phoning at this time of morning?" It started ringing again, and he ran down the passage to the lounge. I heard him answer it, swear, and then hang up. He came back to the bedroom, and headed straight for the shower.

"Who was it?"

"Frank. I've got to go. He wants to meet me now urgently."

"What's going on?"

"It's about Keld and the shooting. Thinks he's found something."

"They got the guy?" I sat bolt upright in bed.

"No, not got anyone yet. But they've heard from witnesses, and some people have come forward. He seems to know what's happening. Problem is, the witnesses are coming forward because of the money we're offering. They want to stay anonymous - the community will lynch them if they're caught ratting. But apparently there have been enough anonymous

people for the story to correlate, and it all matches up with his theories. So I'm going to hear now. Then I'll go straight to Cotonou to meet with the customs people and identify Dennis for them, so they can get that process going. We need to get him back to SA as quickly as we can."

"I'll get you some tea and some breakfast while you shower."

"Thanks. It's going to be a long day. I'll phone you when I know more." He stepped into the bathroom, and started running the water.

"AJ?" I said, leaning against the door frame.

"Hmm?" He turned around to look at me.

"I love you. I want you to know that. I'll be here for you tonight when you get home. I know today's going to be tough, but I believe in you. You'll get through this."

His eyes softened as he came across the bathroom to me, and held me tight. I didn't know who was more scared.

University of Cape Town

40. Cecile

I was so worried I didn't know what to do. Osiname hadn't been home since Benedictine saw him early on the duck night and that was already three days ago. Where was he? I hoped he was ok, but I somehow didn't think he was. He couldn't be. If everything was ok, he would be home. We would have sorted out this misunderstanding of where he was on that night, and why he wasn't available on his phone.

I couldn't eat and I couldn't sleep. My stomach was tight as knots. My cousin didn't know where he was that night, he hadn't seen him. I didn't know who his new friends were, exactly. He told me about them, but I didn't know their full names or have their phone numbers. I went past his soccer club last night and asked around there, but I didn't want them to think anything was wrong, so I just made up some excuse about having supper at his uncle's house, and he must go there instead of home, if he turned up at the club. He never misses soccer, but he wasn't there last night. At least, not that I know of, or that they told me.

So when my cousin arrived at my work that morning and asked if he could speak to me in private, I got really worried. *Madame* greeted him when she saw him.

"*Madame*, he's come to talk to me for a minute, I'll be back in the house in a few minutes."

"Ok Cecile. *Bon jour Monsieur*." We went to my room, and he sat on the chair there. He looked very uncomfortable, and kept on tapping his foot on the ground. Like a snake about to strike. He asked about Benedictine, and about the family in the house and how the children were getting on. All small talk.

"Clairdor is missing playing with James too, he hasn't seen him for a few days."

"Yes, it's been busy here and *Madame* is very distracted." It was killing me waiting for him to get to the point of his visit but I knew I couldn't rush him.

"The family here is not well," I told him. "The man who was sick that I told you about has died. They are very upset about that. *Monsieur* is upset with everything, it seems like."

I told him what I knew about him going to Cotonou to identify the body, and the security problems that I was overhearing more and more about. But they cut off every time they saw

me, so I didn't know everything. "And I think the *Monsieur* is upset with me because of Osiamé. He has the right to be, I am his mother, I should know where my son was.

"And did you hear that the Danish boss was shot? I've, well, oh... I've been wondering if it was a coincidence that it happened on the same night that Osiamé had told Béné that he had important work to do, or if that man had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time." I couldn't look him in the eyes after this. I looked at the floor rather, the red painted concrete, with all the scrapes and cracks, the mould growing around the edges that you could never properly get rid of.

He nodded, and ran his hand over his chin; it looked like he was holding his head up because it was very heavy. Weighed down with important things that I was waiting for him to tell me. I stopped talking after that. I couldn't go on, and I wanted to hear his news. So he started, and after hearing what he had to say, I wanted it to stop. I wanted to vomit actually.

"My cousin, I haven't seen Osiamé, but I've heard about him."

"Osiamé? Is he okay? What have you heard?"

"Have you heard from him at all today?"

"No, nothing! Not since that night. What is it?"

"After you came to see me that night, I lay awake worrying and thinking. Worrying about Osiamé, that he was safe, and not hurt. Thinking what on earth was happening? Why was he not at work where he was supposed to be? So I paid a friend of mine to go around to the hospital and all the clinics in Bohicon and Abomey to check, but Osiamé wasn't in any of them. So then I asked some of my friends that live in different parts of the town to keep their eyes and their ears open, and to tell me if they heard of anything suspicious." He stopped talking then.

I couldn't stand it. "And?"

"And then last night, someone came and told me about the shooting. Of the Danish man. And the description of the shooter sounded as if it could be Osiamé." It felt like I was falling down a deep, deep well. A place that was dark and scary and I couldn't breathe.

"Early this morning, I heard from this same friend that the company's security had arrested some people, and had them in custody with the police and they were questioning them. I don't know if Osiamé is one of the people being questioned, but I do know that some of the people were said to be working for the company. Someone else must be paying them more to make sure that the project wouldn't work."

"*Mon Dieu!*"

"I don't know any more than this, but I wanted to tell you what I do know." I held my head in my hands now, and shook it no as he was talking. He didn't look at me at all. When he finished, we sat still for a while. Neither of us talking. Finally I spoke.

"It's happening all over again, isn't it?"

This time, he looked up at me, and although he said no words, his eyes said everything that I didn't want to hear.

"How can this be? Am I such a bad woman?" Now he shook his head.

"What is it that I did, to have this happen to me again? The whole town will know within days, and it's all going to happen again. The looks, the hate, the pity. I don't know if I can handle it again."

"Have you ever told them what really happened with your husband?"

I shook my head no. Long and slow.

University of Cape Town

41. Margie

I picked up the phone shortly after it started ringing, hobbling as I did so. I had been playing with the kids on the lounge floor, and had stood on a Lego piece as I jumped up.

"Naughty Mommy!" James said as I swore. I laughed at him waving his finger at me; it was just what AJ did to him when he was naughty. *Out of the mouths of babes.*

"Margs, are you inside with the kids?"

"Yes. Why?"

"And Cecile, where is she?"

"She's in her room, her cousin came round earlier to speak to her privately, and they're still out there."

"What're they talking about?"

"AJ, what's going on? How on earth would I know what they're talking about?"

"Margs, the people that are suspected of shooting Keld are the ones involved in sabotaging the whole project and the diesel theft over the last couple of months. Keld's shooting was the final warning to get us out of the country and leave this project alone. To make sure it fails. Frank's busy with them, questioning them, and working with the police to find out what is going on. I'm afraid the shit is about to hit the fan. We still don't know the extent of who is involved, but there're definitely people on the inside connected to this. Margs, we think the shooter was Osiamé."

"Cecile's Osiamé? That can't be! Are you sure? He always seemed to be such a good kid."

"Well, turns out that looks can be deceiving."

"Oh, AJ. Oh no. What do we do?"

"Part of me wants to rip his head off, but the logical part calls for a bit more reason. The arrests Frank has already made has turned the whole place into a ticking time bomb apparently. We don't have Osiamé yet, not sure where he is. I'm actually still in Cotonou, I'm still signing the legalities to get Dennis home. In the hold of a passenger plane. Can you believe it? That's how they ship you home. A body in a sack in a plane. Wonder how many flights we've been on that are carrying bodies underneath us."

"Gross thought. Was it awful?"

"Yes. Although all very professional, I suppose. The worst part was seeing Dennis dressed up in a suit. So not like him at all. It feels all wrong sending him home like that - he'll arrive like a stranger to his wife. He always said suits are for weddings and funeral only, so it's a bit ironic.

Anyway Margs, you and the kids are not safe outside. Please don't leave the house. And I don't think Cecile is that safe either. You need to send Nickson out to the market now to buy in a few days' food for you. Don't tell him why you're not going yourself. Just give him a list, and make it substantial. When Cecile's cousin goes, tell her to go inside the house too, and to stay there. She must sleep inside tonight, she can have James's room, and he can go in with Michaela. Don't tell her about Osiamé, just say there is trouble at work, and I am ordering all the women indoors, including the maids."

"Do you really think it's that bad? That something might happen to us?"

"I don't know. I really don't. But you guys are soft targets and I'm not taking any chances. I've got to go, I'll come straight home from here. I'll see you in about two hours. Remember the shopping, you got enough money?"

"I don't know. I'll check what I have, and shop to that amount."

"Good. And Margs, prepare yourself, we might send the women and kids back to their home countries for a while, until this all blows over. I'll talk to Frank later, when he can give me more concrete info. The army is being called in too, we don't want any riots. This whole thing has become a political play, and looks like we've been put right in the middle of it."

"You really think the opposition party would go to these lengths?"

"I don't know what I think anymore. I would never have believed it if you suggested it a few months ago, but now? Now I believe it. Frank has been collecting evidence, and is about to blow the whole thing out of the water. They're not going to like it, and I suspect trouble is on the way."

"What on earth am I going to say to Cecile? How do I look her in the eyes if I know that Osiamé has shot Keld?"

"*Allegedly* shot Keld. And she doesn't know this yet, so not a word."

"How is he anyway?"

"Who, Keld? Stabilised, stitched up. Angry as a spitting cat that the doctor's won't let him out of the hospital yet. He thinks he needs to be here on site sorting out this mess. He's got a full time guard, one of Frank's guys, and we're sending him home in a few days so that the Danish doctors can have a look at him, and he can recover there."

"The question is what was he doing driving around in that part of town at that time of night, especially after he had been drinking."

"Don't ask questions like that. There're usually only two reasons why the Scandinavians come to work in Africa. Money and women. He's got money, so probably for a woman. That's my guess, and it's pretty much been confirmed by some of the others. Unofficially of course, but none of them seem to think it was that strange. Interesting thing is that someone knew where he usually hangs out, far away from the rest of us, when he went after his women. And who would know where he drives to?"

"I see where you're going with this."

"Anyway, think about what you're going to pack too, if we do send you home. But again, don't say anything to Cecile about this, I don't want word getting out."

"Shouldn't we send her home to her own house? What about her daughter?"

"What *about* her daughter? Let's let her decide Margs, I am not sure how safe her house is, and I don't know about the people that Osiamé was working for on this. If he was double crossing us, who else was he double crossing? Did he do everything that he was supposed to do? Was he meant to just hurt him? Or was he supposed to kill Keld, and he chickened out? If so, I imagine he's hiding very far from those guys as well. He'll lose his job and go to prison from our side. He could lose a lot more if they get hold of him."

"I can't believe it. And here we're playing Lego on the floor."

"Good. Stay that way. Just don't let anyone in. And don't go outside. I'll see you soon."

42. Santie

There I was packing up Dennis's goods into a box to post back to South Africa when Jaco and Andreas both came home in the middle of the afternoon. That's when you know that something is wrong in the Land of Oz, as they say.

"Santie, can you please make us all some coffee? We'll have it in the lounge because there's something that we need to talk about." So I made us all a cup and went through to them. The other three were all sitting there, not saying anything. It was very strange. Jaco was fidgeting with a loose thread in the sofa arm. He looked up when I walked in, and came to carry the tray for me. He's very good like that. Always the gentleman.

"What's going on Jaco? Why are you here now, and wanting to talk to us?" You could see he was uneasy.

"*Liefie*, there are problems at work, serious problems. And so, for our own safety, AJ had said that all the women must go back to their home countries for a while, until things have settled down a bit." Aretha and I looked at each other, and then both started talking at once.

"Go away for a few weeks? For our own safety? What about you? Who's going to look after you?" They explained what was happening at work, and that the biggest problem was that they didn't actually know who exactly was behind the shooting and the diesel theft and the sabotage and they didn't know how far the rot went within the company's own staff. And so, just to be sure, we were being sent home.

"Well, I'm happy for a holiday on the company's account, but I don't want to leave you." Jaco wasn't doing so well, what with Dennis and all, and I didn't think it would be good that he was on his own. I think he read my mind, because he gave a slight shake of his head as he looked at me. I would talk to him about it later.

"I'll be fine, and it won't be for long. It's already the middle of November. The annual shutdown is only four weeks away anyway, so it will really only be these four weeks. Then I'll be joining you again back in South Africa. They've said that you can possibly come back earlier, depending on what they uncover now, but then it's for our own account." Our own account wasn't that big, so that wouldn't be us.

"I could do four weeks I suppose. It'll give me a chance to go and see Stefan again." See if he has improved at all at that halfway house." And I would stay with my Susanna, it would

be so wonderful to see her again. I would look at this as a holiday, I thought. Yes, that's the only way to look at this.

“What about you Aretha? Will you go back to your uncle and aunt again?”

“Yes, to start. Maybe for a week or so. There's not really place in their home anymore. My one cousin has got married, and is living there now too with his wife and she already had children from before, so their house is full. I'll stay with friends, my old neighbours in the village. A week is long enough to stay with them. We'll decide where I go after that later. Maybe come back here, go to a beach resort on the coast.”

I knew she'd only be meeting Andreas's family in December when they went home for Christmas. Either way, it would be a long time until I saw Aretha again, and I knew I was going to miss her. This unlikely friend of mine. It was one of the very good things about living in Bohicon, I'd been forced into a friendship that neither of us would ever have chosen back home, and I would have missed out. Aretha has made my life better. She is very wise, and she makes me realise that everyone has problems, they're just different problems. She's made me a stronger woman, this tiny little thing. I don't know how she did it, but she has.

It would be tricky to try and explain her to my friends, my white, middle aged South African friends, how a young black skinny Tanzanian lady had made me grow, and do things I never would have done before. And how I was going to miss her when I was back in South Africa. Miss sitting together and crocheting and chatting. Miss watching our programs and drinking coffee together. The chairs were different, the coffee was different, the people were different, but the love was the same.

43. Cecile

When my cousin left, I was a hollow shell. The living part of me had been ripped out - the part with my feelings and the pride in my son and happiness, and well, just everything that I loved and lived for. I needed Béné. I needed to be with family now. My own family.

I needed my mother's help - she would tell me what to do. And my father, just like he had made plans the last time. But my mother and father were in a different town, and were very far away. After that, it was just me and Béné and Osiamé. And now, just me and Béné, it seemed.

But then *Madame* called me into the house and told me what was going on at the office, and that I needed to stay inside. With her and the children. I couldn't face that for a whole night. She was not looking at me, *Madame*. I didn't know what else she knew and was not telling me. I hoped to God that she hadn't heard anything about Osiamé yet. I needed to decide what I was going to tell her, and I couldn't think properly. It was not safe, apparently. But who would hurt me? Although what if someone was looking for Osiamé too, these other people that he seemed to be working for? What if they came for him, and found Bénédictine instead?

I couldn't stay there, I had to go home. I would lock myself in my house, and push my table up behind the door. We would sleep together, me and Béné, we would look after each other. Like that last time, only she was younger then, and more vulnerable. And Osiamé, he was only fourteen. Is that what made him like this? To do this thing like his father did before him? Does badness really go from one generation to the next? I thought I was a good mother, and I thought Osiamé was a good son, but now I didn't know. I didn't know anything anymore.

I told *Madame* that I must go home to Béné, that I couldn't leave her at home at this time. Even though we never talked about it, she remembered that day clearly, I know she did, and I needed to get to her to protect her from this. It didn't even matter if it was the truth or not, it's what the people said and thought that was the problem. *Madame* seemed to be worried about me, which was comforting. But there were things that I couldn't tell her, things which we would never share. Like the passing of my husband, I would never be able to tell her about

that. I could never put the shame, and the fear, and the embarrassment into words. How is it that you can be so embarrassed about one you thought you loved? One that you thought would never do anything to hurt you? One that you never thought would leave you feeling worse than the scum on a stagnant pool?

I could never tell her about the confusion of all the noise that seemed to be coming closer and closer to us that day, down the road, towards our house. The neighbours who were all shouting and there was the banging of sticks on something, and the terrible stench of fire and rubber burning, and so we ran outside to see what was going on. I could never tell her about the body I saw staggering up the road, alight with flames engulfing him, writhing and twisting and screaming. And the noise of the crowds not quite drowning out his screams, and the jeering and the prodding and the hitting just carried on and on and on until he fell to the ground.

And I pushed the children back into the house, back to my mother who had come out behind me, and I screamed to her to take them away from this. Away from seeing their father die like this. Away from the crowd that wanted revenge for something that he did. Stealing that man's money, and then being caught. When would my husband ever have stolen anything? But he must have, the people had caught him and when he wouldn't admit it, they took the law into their own hands like it is done here, and they burnt him. Burnt him to a crisp and then left his body on the road so that everyone would see it. The little children laughing at the way that his hands and arms were bent and burnt in the flames. People spitting on the body as they walked passed.

Justice had been done in the community and so the lesson was taught to others. Justice, and lessons, and fear, and sickness and shame and the hurt from being ostracised by everyone we knew and by people we thought were our friends. Nobody spoke to us after that, people crossed the road when I came near, Osiname and Béné were beaten up and teased at school, until I had to take them out of that school. And move to a different town where people didn't know us, didn't know the kind of husband I had had and the kind of father my children had. I had to go that night, when everyone else had gone to bed, I had to go with my mother and father to get the body. And my father had borrowed that car, and we had to put the body into the car so that we could drive out of the town and dig a grave for him. Trying to fit that burnt and twisted and unbending body into the car while the children were left behind at the house. The stench of it, of that flesh, and our vomit. Trying to get the shame out. The bitterness. The gall. And in the dark of night, so that people wouldn't see that it was *my* husband who was the thief. My husband who was killed in the street, like a dog. My husband who had brought

shame to my family and my husband who had now passed the badness on to my son. No, I didn't know how I was going to be able to tell her any of that.

44. Margie

Oh to be back home! It's like the whole of me took a big breath when I arrived back in South Africa and saw my parents waiting for me at the airport. A big breath of air that smelt the bright sunshiny yellow of relief. I don't know why, but I burst into tears.

“What is it? Why you crying? Are you okay?” They asked, talking at the same time. My mom picked up Michaela who was also crying.

“Careful Mom, she’s just puked. I’m fine. Just exhausted travelling with them by myself. And I’m worried about AJ. But probably, mostly, it’s because you’re here and I get to have you look after me for a bit.” It's a funny thing that, whenever I see my parents again, no matter how old I am, or how grown up and responsible, or how many babies I've had or what I've been though, when I see them again, it's like I can simply hand back being the responsible one to them again, and they have to do the looking after for a while. I love that about them.

I looked over at my mom. “Will you be the mom for a while please? Take away all this responsibility and stress.” I was sure there was something Freudian in that, but I didn’t really care. It was so good to be back.

“You’ve come to the right place for some TLC,” my dad said, hoisting up James for a piggyback ride. “How long can you stay?”

“I don’t know, a few weeks. The details are a bit sketchy at the moment. We’ll talk about them later.”

“Was the trip okay?”

“Trying. I urgently need a shower. Michaela threw up on me again just as we descended to land.” *Nothing like arriving smelling of puke with a crying baby.* “And the airlines, so African. Someone forgot to load the food on the plane.”

“How does that even happen?”

“Good question. How is it possible that there is no food or any drinks on a flight, and no one notices until it's too late? The hostesses were doing their checks and only then someone realised that there were no snacks. The pilots blamed the airport staff, the airport staff blamed the hostesses, the hostesses made a plan. *Bless them.* They sent somebody into town to buy croissants and bottled water for everybody. Not quite food for kids, not a happy meal in sight.

The worst part was trying to keep the kids entertained in the confined space until we could take off.”

“Did you like the flight, my little man?” James nodded at his grandpa, still a little shy. It had been nearly a year since they’d seen each other. In person. We spoke on the phone often.

“The noises of the flight entertained them. And thank heavens Santie was travelling on the same plane. She arranged to sit on the opposite side of the aisle to me, so at least the kids could walk between the two of us. That got us through to Brazzaville, Congo, by which time the pilots or someone had contacted their airport staff and arranged some food.”

“Does Santie live in Johannesburg?”

“Yes, shame, she got happier and happier the closer we got to South Africa, while I got more and more tired.” But her excitement to see her children was infectious and I was happy for her. I was exhausted by the time I got to my parents.

“Well, we’re relieved you made it back in one piece.”

“I’m relieved to be here.”

I was desperate to talk to them about everything that had happened over the last few days. *Was it really only days?* It would have to wait until after kids’ bed time.

“My daddy not here now. Daddy still at home.” James’s little voiced piped up. *At home. There you have it.* He’d kept on asking where his dad was while we were on the plane which made me wonder more and more if we were doing the right thing, leaving in such a rush, without him. Was he going to be okay? I didn’t like leaving him there. Santie knew where I was with this, she was in the same boat. Our husbands were literally left in the line of fire.

How bad is it to be bargaining with God to save AJ from any harm? *Take somebody else, anybody else, just not AJ.* I’d spent the trip wondering what I could offer Him that would make Him keep AJ safe. And the kitbag of clothes and goods of Dennis’s that Santie had brought with her to give to Mrs Donaldson was a stark reminder. Those things were out of sight, but not out of mind, the whole way home. Poor Santie, she was going to be visiting Mrs Donaldson too, to give everything back to her. My eyes started watering just thinking about it. I looked in my bag for my tablets, but they weren’t any left in the vial in my bag. I usually had vials stashed everywhere. Shit. I hope I packed the ones from my bedside drawer back in Bohicon.

They weren’t in my bag, but maybe in my suitcase. Damn it! Now was when I needed one, and the little suckers weren’t there for me. I turned to look out of the windows, at the

familiar roads that had memories everywhere, going back to my teenage room in my parents' house. Except now with a toddler to share my double bed and a baby camp cot squeezed in too.

AJ and I didn't have a home in South Africa anymore, we had sold up before we left for Benin. So home now was my parent's house, and it was good to be heading there. Good to feel safe on the roads, good to not have to swerve out of the way of cars heading straight for us as they weaved around potholes. Good to have tar on the roads when you come right down to it. And no chickens and goats.

University of Cape Town

45. Cecile

"Cecile, this is a surprise to see you here. Have you come to talk to me?" asked AJ.

"*Oui Monsieur*, there is a very important matter that I must discuss with you. And because I don't see you at the house anymore, I came here to your office."

"What is it, Cecile? Are you ok? Is it about Osiamé?"

"*Oui Monsieur*, but first, tell me about *Madame* and the babies. Did they get back to *Sud Afrique* ok? Are they well?"

"Thanks Cecile, they are all well. Granny and Grampa are very excited to have them visiting for a while. *Madame* says it is difficult without your help and James keeps asking for you. Michaela has finally got her first teeth as well. Both of the bottom ones came through together."

"*Felicitations!* I am sad to miss it. And James, ai! He is very special. Please tell him Clairdor ask after him. When they coming back *Monsieur*?"

"I am not sure, Cecile. I am not sure at all." He shook his head as he spoke, and looked like he was far away. I hadn't seen him for a week or two, but somehow in that short time he looked like he had got older. A lot older. I was feeling a lot older too, and I wondered if I looked as bad as he did.

While I had been thinking, we were sitting in silence, and he was looking at me expectantly.

"Cecile," he asked, "have you seen Osiamé yet?"

I shook my head. "No *Monsieur*, not since that day of the duck festival, in the morning. He hasn't been home since."

"You must know that our people are after him; they want him for questioning, and the fact that he has run makes it worse. It shows us that he is guilty."

I nodded this time, but I couldn't talk for a minute. My throat felt like it was clogged thick with the sand that blows from the Sahara. When my words finally came out, they were only a whisper.

"I think he might be, *Monsieur*. It is breaking my heart, but I can't stand it anymore. All this worrying is making me sick. I just want it to be over. I want to see my son again."

"Are you sick Cecile? Is there someone to take care of you? To help you?"

"Yes, *Monsieur*, my daughter." Again we sat in silence for a while.

"Cecile, why did you come here to see me today? What is it that you want to tell me?"

"I have nothing specific to tell you *Monsieur*. I came here to apologise."

"Apologise? Why? What is it that you have done?"

"It is what I haven't done that is the problem." This was very difficult to say, and I was trying to keep myself from crying. It wasn't so easy these days. I seemed to be crying all the time. But I had to finish what I had come here to say. Sometimes the only way across the river is through it.

"I see now that I can't have raised my son properly. You must think that I am a terrible mother. I thought that I was raising a good son, a kind boy who took care of his mother and his sister. But it turns out that this is not so. The man that my son has turned into does not seem to be the same person that I thought I was bringing up. This man, the one who it sounds like has done these terrible things, this is not the boy that I know. This is someone else."

I took the handkerchief that the *Monsieur* was kind enough to offer me, and wiped my cheeks.

"I don't think that, Cecile. Not for a minute. I think you are a kind, caring woman who has done everything that you can to raise two children, on your own in the last few years. And helped to raise my own children this past year."

"But the people here in my village thought those bad things about me for many years. Did the, um, did *Madame* tell you about how my husband died? The real story?"

I saw his face sadden, and he nodded at me. He put down the pen that he had had in his hands, and leant across his desk towards me.

"She did, Cecile, she did. And I think that is a terrible thing for you and your family to go through. You must have been very hurt from that."

"I keep wondering if maybe it is the bad spirit of my husband that has got into Osiamé now, and I didn't see it early enough to stop it. Maybe it was there all along, and I didn't want to see it. But now, I am still his mother, and I'm worried about what will happen to him if the people here catch him for stealing. I would rather have him locked up in jail by your people *Monsieur*. Please, let them find him first."

"It is different Cecile. What your husband did, if I got the story correct, was to take from people in his own community. What Osiamé did was against us who come in to make changes to your town. And not everyone wants to see those changes. Some people will see Osiamé as a hero. I don't, but what I think about him is separate from what I think about you.

You are not responsible for the things that he did. He must take responsibility for that himself.”

I nodded. I knew he was talking the truth, I knew this in my head. But my heart was still so sad and sore and angry. Osiamé was not a child anymore. He was a man with his own thoughts who made his own choices. This was his choice. Maybe he couldn't see the long term effect of this. Maybe he was blinded by the money those people would have given him. Maybe this is what he wanted to do. And now he needed to live with the consequences. But sadly, so did we, me and Bénédicte. And we didn't get to choose.

University of Cape Town

46. Santie

It is so nice to be visiting with Susanna again; it has been nearly a year, and I have missed her so very, very much. We are close, you know, Susanna and me. And I have missed her chatting, and having them around for a Sunday roast, and hearing about the everyday things that happen in her life. We used to talk on the phone almost every day when I was still here, but that's too expensive now. So it's nice to be back, catching up with her.

She was very excited when she heard that I was coming back. I told her some of the reasons, but not all of them, because I didn't want to worry her too much. She came with me to Mrs Donaldson house to give her Dennis's stuff that I had brought back, which was nice. She was always good like that, knowing when I needed something, but I don't always like to ask her. I didn't want to go there by myself, to the Donaldson' house that is.

I didn't know what to say to them. I know Mrs Donaldson is dealing with AJ and the company about the official admin, but AJ asked me especially if I could take Dennis's goods, and to visit her. Be the personal touch. I told her all sorts of stories about how Dennis spent his days, and I told her about our house, and Aretha and Andreas, and living in Bohicon. And I told her a bit about how her Dennis had helped my Jaco, and how I would always remember him for being such a good man. Ai, and then we cried a bit together, because it is just so very, very sad, you know.

When we got home, I had to bring up the topic of seeing Stefan. I'm not sure if I have told you or not, but Susa - that's my special name for her - she and Stefan, they don't really get on too well, so I wasn't sure how I was going to manage seeing him.

“Ma, I know how much you want to see him, so he can come spend a night with us. I’ll cook dinner, and you can talk.” That was kind of her. He lives in what you call a halfway house now, for people out of rehab but who still need help and are not ready to go back into normal life. It’s only a few kilometres away, but she doesn't see him very much.

“I am sure he’s changed Susa, in that home with all those trained nurses and people. It’s what they do.”

“It’s not what *they* do that gets me, it’s what he does. I still don't trust him.” That is so sad. She doesn’t trust her own brother. Mind you, there was good reason. He was supposed to

only be living there for six months, but Susanna told me after the six months were up that he should be staying in longer.

“He must stay until he gets better,” I had said. I didn't tell her how much it was costing us. That wasn't important anymore. We were working on that, living in Benin, and things were slowly coming right.

“I've spoken to him only a little on the phone over the past few months, but it's not enough. A mother needs to see her children with her own eyes every now and then, to know if they're okay or not. And look at you, I can see that you're more than ok. You're more beautiful than ever.”

“Ag, Ma!”

“What? It's true.” She smiled a bit then.

“Just phone the centre and arrange it. You've got to sign him out, he can't just leave.” So I did, and ai! I couldn't wait to see him.

“You know, in Bohicon, there is a little boy, Margie's son, James. He's three now, and has fuzzy peach skin cheeks. He holds my hands with his chubby little ones, and sits on my lap, telling me all sorts of nonsense stories. I love it! He used to be like that, Stefan.”

“Must have been a long time ago.”

“Now Susa, you need to be a good Christian, and forgive the past. Forgive him. I know he's made mistakes, everybody makes mistakes.”

“So many, many mistakes,” she added.

It was nice to see him again! He was looking thin, but better than before, and cleaner. He didn't have such bags under his eyes and his skin had improved. He even smiled a bit when he saw me, which made me very excited. I haven't seen him smile for a very long time. So we took him home, and it was a bit awkward to start off with, I must say. So I did most of the talking, trying to soften the atmosphere a bit, and to get him to open up a bit and tell me what his life was like now. Finally he did, and started telling us more and more.

Then something clicked in his head. I saw it I am proud to say, because I am his mother after all, and it is nice to know that maybe I still have a bond with him.

“It's a nice place,” he said. “The people there are good, and, well, they help me a lot. They put on events every now and then, to keep us entertained. Try to get us fit and live a healthy life. There's a fun run coming up soon. You should join us Susanna. You could do with losing a bit.”

She snorted and was about to launch into him but I got in first. “Tell us more about it?”

“Well, they’re still trying to raise the funds that they need to host the event. These things cost money to organise. When they’ve got enough, then the house could make lots of money from the fun run. Get the whole community to take part, you know. Charge an entry fee. Get Coke to sponsor cool drinks at the end. That sort of thing.”

“And how far are you guys from reaching what you need?”

“I think it’s only about another two thousand or so. Should get there in the next couple of months. They like to get us involved in all this, so I guess we’ll be washing cars or something over the next few weeks until we get it.”

“Then what happens to the money they raise?”

“It goes to the centre, to help others. Others like me. Like I told you, these are good people.” That really made my heart warm. All those months of living so on top of each other like we do, in that small house and not having our own space, having to stay with Susa and not in our own home now because there are tenants in our house, it all seems worthwhile when I hear about the good that these caring people are doing for my Stefan, and other people's children like him.

“Ai Stefan, I like to hear stories like that. And look at you – a new person, even helping out with organizing events!”

“Ag, Ma!”

“Ag Ma, what? A mother can be proud of her boy, can’t she?” It makes me want to give that house even more money, although we really don't have it. I would sleep on it tonight, maybe give him some of the money that Jaco had given me for the holiday in the morning, so that maybe they could hold the event just a little sooner. I have some cash, but carrying it around makes me a bit nervous, you know in the airports and things, so I hid it by rolling it up and hiding it in my lipstick holder. I've always done that, putting it in my lipstick holder, for years and years. Some things are just habit I suppose. In the morning, when we took Stefan back to the home, I would give it to them then. Bless them, and all the good they do. I went to sleep with a happy heart, my son was so much better. A new person, it seems.

“I can't believe it. I just can't believe it! You’re a fool for thinking he had changed Ma!”

“Oh Susa! I was so impressed with him last night. I thought he was getting better. I thought that place was helping him. But now, he's done it again!” My breath is like fire, coming out of me like a real dragon, just like Stefan used to call me.

“How could you not have known?”

“How *could* I have known?” He was not in his bed this morning, he has gone. Run away, and taken all my money. Everything that Jaco gave me for the holiday, it's all gone! I wiped away my tears, and couldn't look Susa in the eyes.

“I thought maybe he was just sleeping late, so I left him to it 'til now. When I went in to take him some coffee, he wasn't there. Must have left in the night. And he took it all. All of it.”

“Mom, I can help you out with the money, it's not that. It's that he's a lying, thieving bastard who pretends to be one thing, but actually is another. Who steals from their own mother?”

“He must have remembered. Don't know why I thought he would have forgotten where I keep it.”

“Ma, he's been stealing from you for years, he knows all the hiding places.” Her lips got thinner and thinner as she squished them together, biting back all the stuff she wasn't saying. I could see in her eyes how angry she was.

I was embarrassed. Embarrassed that my own son had done this to me. Taken me for a stupid old woman. “I shouldn't have trusted him; I'm stupid for putting temptation in his path.”

“You're not stupid Ma. He's the evil one.” She must have seen how disappointed I was. And cross with myself.

“I really thought he had grown. Matured. I don't know what made me check my bag. But when he wasn't in his room, and he didn't answer when we called, and his stuff was all gone, it was just like old times. All over again. I just knew to check for the money, old habits die hard. I thought we'd all moved on.

“And you know what? I was actually going to give that money to the house this morning anyway. Aren't I the fool?” I checked other places that I could have hid it, but of course, I knew. I only ever hide money in one place. Who would think to look for money in a lipstick holder? I felt myself crumple, and sat down on the bed amongst all the things I had tipped out of my bag. And as I brushed away my hot tears, Susa came and sat on the bed and just hugged me.

“You were right Susa.” We both knew it, but she knew I was sad also.

“What did I do wrong when I brought you two up? Look at you, so happy and responsible, and got such a good life started for yourself. And him? Where did I make the mistake?”

“You didn’t make any mistake Ma. It’s him, it’s not you. You did nothing wrong.” My heart was hurting for the good man that my little boy could have turned into.

“He’s never going to get better is he? We gave him everything that we you; we treated you the same; and yet, somewhere he got lost. Lost to me forever after today.” He was lost, and now I knew he was never going to be found. Maybe he had never been there in the first place. I don’t know. I shuddered as I took a deep breath, forcing the sobs to stop.

“It can’t be this way. I can’t go through this again.” This is exactly what happened one too many times before, which is when we put him in the rehab centre, and decided that we would make some sacrifices to help him get better. But no more. No way. “Enough is enough. I just can’t do it anymore.”

“We’ll figure something out Ma.”

“I’m not going to let anyone take advantage of me like this, and his poor dad. And on the first day that I have seen him, after nearly a year of living in another country even!” A dirty country, living in a shoebox with all these other people, when I have such a good house here. “No, this is not going to happen anymore. That boy must now look after himself. So far and no further, as they say.”

“What you going to do Ma?”

“I’m going to phone the house, let the manager know that we will pay for three more months. I’ll tell him what happened here. Ask them if maybe they can help Stefan get a job in those months. After that, he’s on his own.” I thought of Aretha, and how it took a young black orphan from Tanzania to teach me about making decisions, and sticking to them. From now on, I’m focusing on what needs to be done now, looking out for the ones that will be there for me, when I need it. Benin has done this to me, given me this gift. I have become tough, I can do anything now. In a strange way, I suppose I have my son to thank for that.

“That should have happened a long time ago,” she said softly, bringing me back.

“It’s breaking my heart, but I can’t go on like this. No, now, when I go back to Benin, then the money we save is going to be used on ourselves when we come back. Paying for someone to help your dad stop having the nightmares and to work through his war days. We could never afford to help both, but now, no more for Stefan. I can’t seem to help to save my son, but maybe I can help to save my husband. Now it’s time for the other man I love.” To be fair, I don’t think Jaco was ready to be helped before. But Dennis helped with that.

“When we come back after the project, then that's where our money is going. On my husband. Your dad.” And I'll stick with him over the next few years while we're still up there, even if it is in only the one little room of ours, in that house for all of us.

“And Susa, we'll always be here for you, if you need us. You are an amazing woman, you seem to be doing just fine by yourself. How did you get to be so strong?”

“I take after my ma, you know. A strong woman. A woman of courage.” And she kissed me on my cheek.

University of Cape Town

47. Cecile

The winds are starting to blow from the desert again – the hot Harmattan from the north that brings change every year. The days are very long, now that I don't have James and Michaela here to look after, and I only go to the house two mornings a week, just to check that everything is still clean, and to wash *Monsieur's* clothes.

He doesn't need me more than that, and *Madame* and children, they are not back yet. I am not sure if they will ever come back. I miss them more than I thought I would. I wonder if they ever think of me. *Monsieur* was kind to say the things he did, when I saw him last week, but somehow, I just know from looking at his face, that his heart is no longer here. There is change coming for that family.

I hope there is change coming for the rest of us too, we need it. The good spirit that was around the work people is gone. Now, when I go along the road that they are building, or like when I was in the office that day, it feels like someone has sucked the life out of the project. The atmosphere is brittle like the branches of trees at the end of the dry season. And me, I am also brittle.

Someone has sucked the life out of me too. I feel like an old person, like the dried out husk of a coconut. The hard shell that I had built up to protect myself after my husband was killed was shattered open by the axe of my son's actions, and where the sweet, soft centre used to be, is dried up, cracked and rancid. That's me now. Dried up and bitter.

I still catch myself looking down the road, looking to see if maybe Osiamé is coming back. Coming back to me as his mother, and to the company to face up to them, because that is the right thing to do. But the road remains full of other people, and never Osiamé. I have made myself sick with all this worry, and it has been hard on Béné too. I don't know what to do about it. What *can* I do about it? It doesn't feel like I am capable of much anymore. I wasn't able to choose a good husband. I wasn't able to raise a good son. The only thing that I seem to have got right is my daughter. Bless her for being who she is, and bless her for looking after me.

What I need is the courage to let go, but that is one of the hardest things to do, and I don't think I am that brave. I need to let go of Osiamé and his decisions and let him sort himself out

now. But what kind of mother does that? How can I just leave him? I can't. Not yet. Not while he still needs me.

I asked this of Bénédicte the other day, and crumpled a bit more inside when she said that he doesn't seem to need me anymore anyway. How can she be so cruel? That hurt me, more than I can tell you, and I lived through a dark fog for many days. But in that dark fog, in the very middle, a thought crept into my mind, and I can't seem to get it out. Maybe she is right. Maybe he doesn't need me. That would be awful, because I need to be needed. And if my two children don't need me, who does?

Béné is coping very well by herself, and I am needing her to look after me. I am getting very weak with all this worry. Weak and cracked and bitter. The babies that once needed me have left too. I need to find other people who do, another family maybe, because I seem to be better with other families than with my own. I know that I need to let Osame go, but it's so much easier to hold onto them, keep them close. I know I can't though, for my sake and for Béné's. So now I will be trying, trying to start again.

I must find the courage from somewhere, and I must find new people who need me. This is my cross to bear, but it is what I must do. My son, I must let him choose his own path in this world, and I can only watch it happen from the sidelines.

48. Margie

It was after I had been in bed for three days that my parents finally put their foot down.

“Come, get dressed, you’re going to the doctor.”

“The doctor? Why? I’m not sick.”

“Margs, you’ve been curled in the foetal position, crying non-stop.”

“It’s just because I’m missing AJ. More than anything in the world. He’s so far away and I know that, at the speed things were happening when we left, he must be right in the middle of dealing with all the fallout - the shooting, Osame disappearing, all the admin around Dennis’s death, and even worse, taking on the Med-evac company.”

“It’s more than that Margie. These are signs of depression.” Then my mom added quietly, “I recognise them.”

That got me. I rolled over to face her, sitting up against the headboard as I did.

“When did you have depression?”

“After your brothers, mainly. We were talking at book club the other night, one lady’s daughter has it. I listened, because as she spoke, it sparked something. She could have been talking about me all those years ago. It went away eventually, I think it always does, but unless you do something about it early, it taints everything. And I mean everything. So now I’m recognising it, and we’re going for help. Today.

“I never knew.”

“Of course you didn’t. You were a baby. Just like your kids won’t know about any of this.”

“Mom, AJ doesn’t know. About any of this.”

She snorted out a laugh. “I don’t think you give your husband enough credit.”

“He doesn’t! I’ve kept it well hidden. I’ve kept my brave face on.”

“If that were true, AJ wouldn’t have phoned me the minute he put you on the plane, and asked me to watch you. He’s worried about you Margie. He’s been suspecting that things were getting worse, but he said there wasn’t anywhere to treat you up there. Another reason why he was so keen to get you back here, to us. Apparently Cecile had told him months ago that you were taking some tablets...”

“He knows about those?” I interrupted.

She nodded. “What are they?”

“Uppers, of some sort.”

“This has got a lot to do with your memories of Dale, hasn’t it Margs? You need to put him to rest. Let that baby go. For once and for all. Don’t forget him, but forgive the people involved then, and forgive yourself.”

“I don’t think I could ever do that. A part of me died when he did.”

“Of course it did. He’s was your baby. Your first child. Nothing will ever take that away from you.”

“I thought Benin would. I thought running away, starting a new life would help me get over it all. New beginnings and all that. Oh Mom,” I said, dissolving again, “I’m such a wimp. How do you think AJ still manages to love me?”

“Oh please. I’m not getting into a pity party now. Of course AJ loves you, what’s not to love?” She gave me a hug, with an extra squeeze before she let me go. “I’ve had long talks to him while you’ve been AWOL in your bedroom. He’s coming here in about three weeks, mid-December when the site shuts down for Christmas and the summer break. I promised him, I would get you help before that. When he’s here, you guys can discuss what you plan to do, if you go back there and carry on, or if you look for something else back here.”

“Please, something else back here.” I said softly, as I picked the little fuzz balls off the blanket.”

“You can’t make any decisions now, not while you’re like this.”

“It’s AJ’s decision really. His job.”

“No it’s not. It’s both of yours. You’re a family Margs, in this together. For better, for worse. In sickness and in health. Remember that?”

I nodded.

“Come. I’ve already made the appointment. We leave in an hour. You might want to shower, and wash the past away. You’re going forward now.”

I rolled my eyes at her, and we both laughed. She watched too much Oprah. But she was right, I needed to get some proper help. I flipped back the duvet, and swung my legs out of bed. I wiped my face in my hands and sat looking out of the window for a minute before I heard little footsteps running down the passage. I smiled, waiting for James and Michaela to come and cannonball me back onto the bed. I held them close as they did, giggling and laughing. I took a deep breath into them, and recognised the bright violet around them as the colour of courage.

--- The end ---